

Dahlia in Bloom

Crafting a Fresh Start
with **Magical Tools**

Hisaya Amagishi
Illustrator: Kei

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Castle Etiquette and the Lady of the Green Tower

“When she is being escorted, the woman shall rest the fingers of her right hand upon the man’s left. However, if her escort is left-handed, then she shall take his right hand instead,” read a passage in the encyclopedic tome on proprieties.

Her eyes glazed over as she recalled how complicated business etiquette had sometimes been in her past life as well, but as she had been born as a commoner in this life, this was a nuisance that she hadn’t quite anticipated.

Dahlia Rossetti was her name in this world, and this was her second chance at life. She had found her calling as a maker of magical tools that made daily life easier. Her red hair and green eyes contrasted brilliantly with her meek and modest character, something she shared with her past self.

“How goes it?” asked the young man sitting diagonally across from her at the coffee table in the living room. Volfred Scalfarotto was the fourth son of an earl, a royal knight, a member of the Order of Beast Hunters, and—perhaps most importantly of all—Dahlia’s good friend. His fair skin stood out against his jet-black hair, pairing handsomely with a sharp nose and a chiseled jawline. However, most striking were his eyes of gold; they completed an aesthetic that ought to have been the magnum opus of a great painter. But for him, the blessing of beauty was a curse in disguise.

“Not very well, I’m afraid. There seems to be quite a bit of castle etiquette that isn’t covered here... How about you, Volf?”

“This is tricky, all right. Like on this page, it says, ‘Before entering a room with someone higher in social status, the woman shall remove her hand from her escort’s. Then, they shall individually enter the room and offer their salutations.’ But what if you have no idea who’s inside the room? Not to mention, I very much doubt I’d remember that rule either,” he said, and then heaved a sigh. Defeated though he was, the pensive look on his face was no less evocative of a fine portrait.

In her past life, Dahlia would have described her current home as a fantasy world, what with the magic toolmakers and monster hunters here; all that was missing were the magic carpet rides and the alchemical transmutation of lead into gold. For work, she crafted useful everyday items, not unlike the nifty gadgets and household appliances of her previous lifetime. As for Volf, he defended the kingdom's subjects from the catastrophic force of nature that were monsters. But how had a craftswoman and a knight become entangled in the troubles of decorum?

It had started with a trifling matter of wet socks. Volf made an off-the-cuff remark to Dahlia about how his boots trapped sweat and moisture and how it plagued him during expeditions, to which she quickly found a solution in enchanting a set of wicking toe socks and evaporating insoles. Dahlia had originally had them made for her late father, but he'd passed away before he could ever use them. Volf had a few extra sets, and so he shared them with his captain and fellow knights, garnering rave reviews. As far as Dahlia was concerned, just knowing that her inventions were making a positive difference was satisfaction enough.

However, there were even more surprises in store. When the contract came in to supply the Order of Beast Hunters with socks and soles, Dahlia assumed they had mistakenly added extra zeros to their figures and hence sought the vice-guildmaster of the Merchants' Guild for advice. It transpired that the order had made no mistake, and Dahlia's overnight success necessitated a meeting with the heads of the Tailors' Guild and the Adventurers' Guild. In the end, they'd made plans for the construction of a new workshop to facilitate mass production of the toe socks and insoles.

Thus, Dahlia needed to send her regards on behalf of the Rossetti Trading Company to the Order of Beast Hunters before production began. However, when she was more or less summoned to the castle by the order's captain, she wasn't given much of a choice but to visit in person.

The castle was neither a place for commoners nor was it somewhere that the owner of a recently founded company would go directly for business meetings. Though her father had been a baron, Dahlia hadn't grown up as a noble and thus knew nothing of their decorum. On the other hand, Volf was the son of an

earl and also a guarantor of the company. It might seem obvious that he could simply teach her from experience, but nothing ever came that easily.

Volf had lived in a villa separate from his family estate from about the age of ten. Soon after graduating from high school, he'd entered the Order of Beast Hunters. This meant that he knew the very basics of etiquette but was far from comfortable around it. Moreover, he had little opportunity to practice the formalities because his work didn't involve tending to visiting dignitaries. Ultimately, all of these circumstances had led to the current predicament inside the ivy-twined tower where Dahlia and Volf were suffering through the dry manual of instruction.

"I would've studied harder if I'd known I was gonna need it someday..." Volf groaned as he splayed across the table.

"It's almost as if we're cramming the day before our finals."

"Just like we're back in school, huh?"

In the capital of Ordine, formal education consisted of elementary school and high school. Most children attended the former for the fundamentals, such as reading, writing, arithmetic, and basic history. High schools were akin to institutes of technology as they offered specific vocational training and applied research. Unlike in Japan, age was not a factor in the educational system here. However, the concepts of entrance examinations, advancement, and graduation were identical. Naturally, failure meant being unable to matriculate, advance a grade, or graduate, respectively.

Right before exams, students' cries lamenting their lack of preparation echoed through both elementary and high schools. It was predictably a whole different story afterward, as they reverted to their usual fun-loving selves.

"Why is it so much easier to remember stuff about magical swords...?" Volf asked. He sighed once again.

To say that he was a fanatic on the subject was a bit of an understatement. If there existed a fairy tale about a magical sword, no matter what nation it was from, Volf had all the words from the preface to the afterword memorized. He had failed twice to pull the undrawable sword from the stone in the castle and had burned his hand touching his captain's magical sword (with permission, of

course). Recently, Dahlia had even indulged him by conducting an experiment to create an enchanted sword. It'd be a wise bet to count on him being overjoyed when they were successful.

"That's, um, very much like you, Volf."

"Hey, magical swords and chivalric romance go hand in hand. And look who's talking," he said, jokingly defending himself. "You know everything there is to know about magical tools."

"Well, I suppose. I am a magical toolmaker, after all." A professional had to be knowledgeable in her field, she reasoned. And Dahlia was indeed very inquisitive about any magical tool, new or old, and she loved discovering and trying ones she had yet to see.

She'd always had a fondness for making things, even in her old life when she had worked at a company that produced household appliances. It was unfortunate, to say the least, that she was transferred to the customer satisfaction department to handle complaints. It was there that she'd overworked herself into her grave.

But now that the appliances she made were magical, the possibilities were even greater than before. In this world, there were myriads of different materials from which to craft tools and innumerable sources of ingredients for enchantment. Metals, plants, and monster parts could be combined in different recipes and ratios for an endless variety of magical effects.

However, for Dahlia, the grandest idea of all was that magical tools could improve the lives of ordinary people, just as the domestic appliances of her previous life had. She aimed to make life just a little easier and people just a little happier, and her inventions provided her the means. And if that wasn't romanticism, then what was?

Volf noticed Dahlia's attention was no longer on the pages of the etiquette manual but had drifted to the books on magical tools that rested on her shelves. His golden eyes narrowed to crescents as he chuckled heartily. "That's so like you too, Dahlia. Guess we're just two peas in a pod."

And she knew he was right.



In a corner of the nobles' quarter lay the Goddess's Right Eye, a store specializing in magical tools. Its proprietor was a man named Oswald; it was he who had so kindly offered Dahlia lessons in proper castle etiquette. Dahlia arrived before the store closed for the day. Volf—who was by her side—had asked to come along, so she had sent him a letter when the appointment was scheduled. Behind the two of them was Ivano, who also wanted to introduce himself to Oswald as a guarantor of the Rossetti Trading Company. Fortunately, Oswald had scheduled this meeting for right before the end of the workday, meaning that Ivano was able to make the visit as well.

Shockingly, Volf had chosen to wear his black dress uniform. He said he was determined to learn proper manners for the dealings between the company and his order, but his outfit was surely unsuitable for the sweltering summer sun. Dahlia felt quite guilty knowing that he would go this far for her company. Even Ivano worried about him, asking him about his attire.

Two imposing pillars engraved with beautiful goddesses and flowers flanked the marble storefront, which was so polished that it reflected its surroundings. The Goddess's Right Eye felt dauntingly upper crust, but Dahlia's anxiety was no reason not to enter. Just as she reached for the gleaming white door handle, a woman came out of the store. Volf retrieved and affixed his pair of fairy glass spectacles in one astonishingly swift motion.

"Welcome to the Goddess's Right Eye. You must be from the Rossetti Trading Company."

"Yes, that's correct. Thank you very much for having us," replied Dahlia.

"Our pleasure. Please, come inside," the woman said with a cheerful smile. Compared to Dahlia, her red hair was a shade lighter and her green eyes were a shade brighter. All three guests felt her welcoming presence as she guided them along. "Follow me, if you please, and I shall take you to the second floor of our store."

Their party arrived at a reception room well decorated in a gold-on-white scheme; the gold was unpolished, giving off a serene atmosphere. Unfortunately, betraying that intended effect, Dahlia was worried about the

value of the furnishings and was extra careful to not bump into anything. Even the blue carpeting was vibrant and pristine, as though unwelcoming of her footsteps.

Behind a white table, Oswald was waiting. He wore a black suit, with his gray hair slicked back, and a pair of silver-rimmed glasses—just as Dahlia remembered him from the last time they’d met. Beside him stood three other women, all wearing identical silver engagement bracelets studded with many a diamond. They greeted Volf, Dahlia, and Ivano with bows. “My three wives were eager to introduce themselves to you,” Oswald said.

“My three wives,” he’d said—*what a completely new and extremely alien turn of phrase*, thought Dahlia. Married though they were, she couldn’t help but wonder if they were “eager to introduce themselves” merely as a pretext to see Volf, the capital’s handsomest man.

The first was a middle-aged woman with blonde hair and verdant eyes—undoubtedly Oswald’s first wife. “My name is Caterina Zola,” she said with a smile. Her lustrous blue dress and gold necklace suited her graceful demeanor well, hinting at her noble birth.

“My name is Fiore Zola,” continued the woman with red hair and jade eyes—the one who had greeted the guests at the door. She looked no more than a dozen years older than Dahlia. Regardless of her age, her frilly ivory dress and her gentle smile were rather endearing.

“And I’m Ermelinda Zola,” the third woman said. She seemed older than Dahlia but still well within her twenties. Ermelinda was about her height too, but had raven hair and eyes the shade of grass. Her voluptuous figure was accentuated by her matte black dress. Had she been in Dahlia’s previous world, she would surely have been scouted for a modeling gig. In fact, all three of Oswald’s wives were beautiful by anybody’s standard, but they were so wildly different from one another that it was baffling to try to gauge his taste in women.

Afterward, the three members of the Rossetti Trading Company formally introduced themselves in turn. Dahlia was awfully nervous and came across a little stilted. Surprisingly, Volf and Ivano were just as much so, likely bewitched

by the wives' beauty. Still, they all managed to force out their introductions before sitting down at the table.

"Thank you, you three. Ermelinda, could I have you mind the shop? You two can feel free to head home," instructed Oswald. The three women left with quick bows and pleasant smiles, and then the room quickly quieted down. He continued, "Apologies for taking up your precious time. Now then, since we shall only be covering the rules specific to conduct inside the castle, it shouldn't take more than four or five tries before you have it all completely memorized. First I'll have you practice by reading from these notes. Then, subsequently, I'll have Miss Dahlia partner up with Caterina and Mr. Mercadante with myself to get some hands-on experience."

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Oswald," said Dahlia.

"Here, please take these notes. You too, Sir Volfred, in case you would like a refresher." Oswald hoisted a red leather case onto the table and extracted from it three bundles of paper, together at least a textbook or two in thickness. It was hardly appropriate to minimize them as merely "notes," as each stack was bigger than Dahlia's fist. "Each page describes only one rule. As when studying for a test in school, you can set aside the ones that you already have memorized. Otherwise, please peruse them thoroughly. It certainly looks like there is a lot to go through, but I assure you it'll be but a trifle." He had a point in that there wasn't a lot of text on each sheet of paper, but they were piled high and were certainly nothing to sneeze at.

A quick glance at a few pages revealed to Dahlia the dizzying fact that more of the information was new to her than not. She glanced to her side and caught Ivano wearing a thousand-yard stare. She then looked over to her other side, expecting Volf to be more or less an expert on this subject, but he too was staring at his papers with a weary look.

Volf looked back at her with a pained expression. "I'll be honest—I'm not feeling so confident either," he said in a hushed tone.



“As long as you have these fundamentals down pat, you shan’t embarrass yourselves. Afterward, we shall dive into matters more advanced,” Oswald explained with a bright smile. His standards were far too high; these so-called fundamentals were already a great deal of information for the three of them to take in, never mind anything more advanced. “Let’s master these rules today, then plan for our next meeting. I was hoping that we could all have a meal together—that is, if it wouldn’t be an imposition, of course.”

“Oh, no, not at all. Thank you very much for your invitation,” Dahlia responded gracefully. She, Ivano, and Oswald managed to find a date for their next outing. But since Volf was on call as a knight of the Order of Beast Hunters, it was difficult for him to commit to any plans, and so he had to respectfully decline. He could have used one of his days off, but Dahlia would never have forced him to do such a thing; after all, he was a guarantor and not an employee of the company.

As Ivano was penciling in their next appointment, something about Volf caught Oswald’s eye. “Oh, Sir Volfred, your eyeglasses are enchanted with fairy glass.”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“Were they perhaps crafted by Mr. Carlo Rossetti?”

“No, they weren’t.”

“No? Whose work are they, then?” There was a moment before Oswald’s sensibilities caught up with his curiosity. “Oh, excuse me for these hounding questions; I’m simply interested as a magical toolmaker myself. Please be assured that I show great discretion regarding my customers’ possessions, and feel free to refuse to answer if it is a matter of confidentiality.”

“These are...”

When Volf faltered, Dahlia put in, “I made them.” Some of the wares in Oswald’s shop also contained fairy glass. Its rarity was such that Dahlia feared she might have difficulties procuring more in the future, so she reasoned by broaching the topic with Oswald, she might secure a more reliable source of materials.

“How very impressive that you’re able to work with fairy glass, Miss Dahlia.”

“Thank you for your kind words.” Dahlia was a bit more relaxed; it no longer felt as though she were speaking to a professor at school.

“And if I may continue, is Sir Volfred’s bracelet—erm, actually, never mind who made it. What I *did* notice is that it has some interesting magical properties. Has it perhaps been enchanted with silver wolf fang?”

“Um...sköll, actually.”

“Sköll?!” Oswald knitted his brows as the smile vanished from his face. “Excuse me for the tactless question, Miss Dahlia, but how powerful is your magic?”

“My magic is grade eight.”

“*Assuming* that you were the one who enchanted said bracelet, under no circumstances are you to repeat the fact. One false step and it *will* spell your doom.”

Volf was the first to react. “What?!”

“Whatever do you mean?” Ivano pressed.

She tried reassuring her two friends, who now looked extremely grim. “Don’t worry, it wasn’t *that* serious! Yes, it’s true that it took nearly all of my magic, but I wasn’t close to dying or anything...”

“Draining your magical reserve would ordinarily cause you merely to pass out, but there have been cases in which sköll fangs took more magic than the toolmaker had to give. They say that, depending on the size of the fang and the magical power of the monster it came from, it can whittle your life away. It isn’t just a hypothetical either; there have been people in the kingdom who perished whilst enchanting,” explained Oswald. “The point I am driving at is that sköll fangs aren’t a material that you should use until you reach at least grade nine.”

“Oh. I didn’t know...” Dahlia turned white as a sheet. She was fortunate to have made it out with only light injuries; her second life could have been just as short as her first. She dared not look to her left, where somebody was staring daggers at her.

“Did Mr. Carlo teach you about the sköll?”

“No, not in particular...”

“Nothing about fairy glass either, then?”

“Well, he had said that it was something rare and that it required considerable magical ability to work with.”

“How surprising...” Oswald sighed to himself without so much as trying to hide his exasperation. “Did your father instruct you on the usages and dangers of sköll parts? Perhaps he passed away before he had the chance to do so. What about enchanting efficiency, increasing your magic level, and composite enchantment?”

“Only enchanting efficiency.”

“And what of his other apprentice?”

“I don’t think so and, um, I wouldn’t be able to find out either...”

“Oh, that’s right, I heard about that utter boneheaded fool.”

“Mr. Oswald?!” Dahlia subconsciously blurted out his name, aghast at his suddenly icy tone.

“Forgive me for being too frank,” he apologized as he restored a smile to his face.

Volf then chimed in, asking, “Mr. Oswald, would you be able to teach Dahlia the aforementioned skills?”

“Volf—er, *Sir Volf*,” Dahlia managed to correct herself, “that would be far too much to ask of Mr. Oswald. You see, a magical toolmaker’s skills are something to be passed on to his disciples or family members.” A master toolmaker’s unique techniques usually remained within their school. To Oswald, Dahlia was no more than a daughter of an old friend, hardly someone who qualified for his tutelage.

“But it *is* an interesting idea, I must say. I do have many years of experience on my side and I’m sure there are at least a few things I could teach Miss Dahlia. Though I cannot say for certain how much time it would take, I’d feel confident working with any successor of Mr. Carlo’s. He was someone whose instincts

were always reliable.” Oswald paused to look over the rims of his glasses, staring into her with his silvery eyes as if examining one of his works in progress—a kind of concentration familiar to her as a fellow toolmaker. “Miss Dahlia, are you willing to study under my wing? I will ask for fifty gold. You can pay me back in interest-free installments after you have learned everything from me. However, as professionals in our trade, we must have absolute privacy, meaning that no others may be present when we are together. If these conditions are not acceptable to you, then—”

She bowed and accepted his terms before he could even finish his sentence. “I would be honored to receive your mentorship.”

“Dahlia!”

“Ms. Dahlia!”

“You’re decisive, just like Mr. Carlo was,” the silver-haired man said with a big smile, more or less ignoring the panicked responses of the other men.

“Mr. Mercadante, I would have no problem with someone waiting outside of the workshop. Perhaps I could ask one of my wives to accompany us, if that would alleviate your concerns,” Oswald suggested.

“Oh, there’s no need for that. I apologize for my outburst; it’s just that there seem to be quite a few rumors...”

“Yes, quite a few baseless rumors.”

Ivano leaned back into his seat and looked at the craftsman. They’d met countless times at the Merchants’ Guild before, but there was something different about Oswald today, almost as if his metallic silver eyes were glinting with a hint of mischief. Many flamboyant rumors surrounded him; he was not unlike Volf in that regard.

“Do you pay heed to those *baseless* rumors, Chairman Zola?”

“Not in the slightest. It’s inevitable that birds tweet and chirp, so you might as well let them be. And if anything, it makes for good publicity.”

“I hope to have your poise someday.”

“Worry not. That is but a matter of time if you continue to find success in dealings with the castle. Then you will have the birds to sing or strangle as you please,” Oswald asserted.

Ivano found himself holding his breath. From a young age, Oswald had been the center of much hearsay representing him as a womanizer, but Ivano didn’t know how much of it was true and how much of it was truly baseless. Oswald had never seemed to be bothered by those words. Instead, he’d accrued power to himself through his craft and trade, and that power granted him control over the rumor mill. It was also because of that power that Ivano chose not to pry too deeply into how he “strangled the birds.”

“By the by, Mr. Mercadante, I recommend you raise a puppy as soon as possible.”

“A puppy, you say?”

“Yes. A puppy will become a loyal hound with proper training. As for myself, though, I must’ve gone wrong somewhere in the process and suffered a terrible bite.”

Reading between the lines, Ivano realized that Oswald was suggesting he hire someone early in their career in the hopes they would someday become a devoted worker. As for having been bitten, he was most likely referring to a well-known tale of betrayal: his most trusted employee had eloped with his wife. However, their sudden talk of dogs left the other two guests confused.

“That is sage advice indeed. Maybe walking a dog could help me work off my big belly,” Ivano jested. His remark drew laughter from everyone in the room, though Dahlia might have been the only one who genuinely found it funny.

Once the laughter died down, Oswald asked, “Miss Dahlia, may I take you to the next room to discuss the terms of my instruction?”

“Being alone with an unmarried woman isn’t quite, erm...” Volf began to protest, perhaps a little hypocritically, but he trailed off.

“If it would put you at ease, we could save the conversation for next time after I enter a magical contract and promise not to endanger Miss Dahlia,” Oswald proposed to the shock of Ivano and Volf.

“No, you needn’t go that far!” Dahlia objected. “You have my trust, Mr. Oswald. I—”

“Dahlia...?”

“Um, what I meant to say is that I’m not concerned at all! So...I’m all right with it.” she said in a panic, flashing back to the faux pas she had committed at the Merchants’ Guild.

“You have my trust, Mr. Fortunato. I leave everything to you... When you say that to a noble gentleman, it means you consider him worthy of being your knight. It expresses both your respect and affection... It was a popular thing for noblewomen to say when they spent the night with a man for the first time.” She had used a few choice phrases that would not sound so innocent to a noble’s ears, and recalling them made her scream internally, but ignorance of the law excuses not. Right now, though, she could only hope that Oswald wouldn’t notice her distress.

As he stood, he betrayed no sign of being perturbed. “Oh, please fret not. I have with me an anti-eavesdropper, so we can keep the door open. And so, if I may, I will be borrowing Miss Dahlia for about fifteen minutes in the other room,” the silver fox said to audible sighs of relief.

As she was walking inside, Oswald turned around and flashed a teasing grin. “Don’t worry, she’ll be in good hands,” he said in a near-whisper, likely audible to nobody but Volf.

Soon after the two craftspeople went inside the adjacent room, Ermelinda arrived to minister to the remaining two guests. They declined her offer of wine but did accept cold sparkling water, and then she left the room again. Ivano had some vague notion of what Dahlia and Oswald might be discussing, but now that the room was shrouded by the anti-eavesdropper, he was left wondering what precisely the contents of the conversation could be.

“Sir Volf, do you have one too?” he asked.

“Yeah, I just turned it on,” Volf replied with a slight hint of displeasure. He had discreetly activated his anti-eavesdropping device under his clothes.

“A striking resemblance, no?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Surely you can’t deny that their eye colors and demeanors are awfully similar?”

“I can, and I do.”

They may not have said explicitly who looked like whom, but there was an implicit understanding between the two men. Oswald’s three wives all had eyes in shades of green, just like Dahlia’s.

Seeing Volf’s dejected golden eyes staring at the ground, Ivano couldn’t hold his strained smile any longer either.

“He really put the pressure on you back there, didn’t he, Ivano?”

“Sure did. We’re truly different people, and not just in physical age. Lately, I’ve been a bit full of myself because of all the good things happening around us, so I’m glad he humbled me a little.” Ivano, in his thirties, was about twenty years younger than Oswald. Ivano had held fast against the sudden bout of patronizing advice, but all the same, he had not felt slighted by their exchange—Oswald of the Zola Company was not only a skilled magical toolmaker but a shrewd merchant as well, and his advice bore listening to. “He managed to tease you a bit too, Sir Volf.”

“Did he, now?”

“I thought so.” Ivano understood that he himself had been poked fun at, but he didn’t want to admit that Oswald had succeeded in pushing his buttons. Though Ivano had initially had his guard up for Dahlia’s sake, he had let it down when he saw Oswald’s behavior—he spoke firmly like a mentor, but his eyes were kind like a father’s. Ivano had noted that he was much like Carlo and that he had no intentions of harming Dahlia. It was just that neither he nor Volf were in any place to speak up about Oswald.

“Why would he do that? I wouldn’t imagine he’d get much entertainment out of it.”

“Well, actually—” Ivano knew better than to tell him the truth. Whether it

was that Volf himself didn't realize it or that he didn't *want* to realize it, the extent to which he fussed over Dahlia was plain as day. Knowing that the conversation wouldn't go anywhere, Ivano turned on a dime and steered it elsewhere. "I'm sure he just wanted to give us 'young'uns' what for. Anyway, I never knew how dangerous making magical tools could be."

"No kidding. I've heard a few stories, but I didn't think she'd put her life on the line like that..." Volf stared at the bracelet on his left wrist, contemplating the perilous process that had brought it into existence. The problem was that neither he nor Ivano were in a position to help mitigate the dangers for Dahlia, and so they were left with little choice but to rely on Oswald and his expertise. "Has the Zola Company worked with the castle for long?"

"Mm, for the past twenty years or so. They have business with the order too, I think."

Born into nobility, Oswald had left his family and become a magical toolmaker. It was through his own hard work that his company had found success and become trading partners with the castle, earning him his barony. Word on the street was that it would be just a matter of time before he was made a viscount. Ivano wished for Dahlia to absorb Oswald's varied skills and experience, and for Oswald to guide her along his successful path—for Dahlia to become not just an adept magical toolmaker but an accomplished chairperson.

However, the youth sitting beside Ivano seemed troubled by that very thought. "She'll be self-conscious when she realizes how little she knows," grumbled Volf.

"You ought to look on the bright side. Dahlia first has to know what she doesn't know so that she can grow and better herself."

"I know you're right, but still..." Volf gulped down the remaining club soda in his glass as if he were trying to drown his sorrows in the non-alcoholic drink.



Oswald sat down across from Dahlia in the adjoining room, which was nearly identical to the main reception room. "Excuse me for undoing my sleeve," he said as he took off a cuff link adorned with red jewels and placed it on the table between the two of them. "This is my anti-eavesdropper. I'll activate it right

now.”

There weren’t any signs of it powering on—no flashing lights or any kind of magical emission. It was completely discreet, likely designed as such for a noble like himself. He continued, “If I may, I would like to go over my terms again. I shall instruct you until you know how to safely work alone as a magical toolmaker. More explicitly, our lessons will include how to work with rare materials, increase your magic level, and create composite enchantments. I ask for fifty gold, which you may pay back in interest-free installments after you become a full-fledged craftswoman. Are my terms acceptable to you?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Our sessions will take place in my workshop with just the two of us present, although I have no objections if you would prefer to have someone from your company wait in the room next door along with one of my wives.”

“Thank you, as well, for being considerate. I’m sure there wouldn’t be all this trouble were I a man instead.”

“If that were the case, I might not have offered.” Oswald’s sly smile made it obvious his statement was tongue-in-cheek, eliciting a genuine chuckle from Dahlia. “Let us begin after you have finished our etiquette lessons, so that we’ll stand equally as toolmakers with business with the castle. Shall we aim for a three-to four-hour lesson each week, depending on our availability?”

“That would be splendid. I’ll do my best to accommodate your schedule. But...” She hesitated as one particular thing still nagged her. “Are you sure about passing your craft on to me?” Dahlia was neither Oswald’s apprentice nor an employee of his trading company. Even if she qualified for his instruction, fifty gold was far too low an asking price.

“Working with rare materials and special enchantments... I can’t deny those are things that I should only teach to my own disciples. But the way I see it is that if you were to lose your life because of the kinds of mistakes you’ve made, I can’t imagine Mr. Carlo would be very understanding. I’d fear for my well-being when I meet him again on the other side, you see.”

Dahlia took a moment to collect her thoughts. She knew he was correct about the sköll bracelet—her father would have been absolutely furious at her. “I’m

genuinely very grateful, Mr. Oswald. Thank you. But, um...would your apprentices also approve of this?" Surely they would feel snubbed, and she could never be apologetic enough were she to break the bond between master and apprentice.

"The truth is that I had three disciples, but all of them turned out less than stellar. Quite shameful on my part, I know," he said, his gaze on the ground.

Thinking back on the compendious notes on etiquette he'd shown her earlier, Dahlia assumed the fault lay in his strict standards. "That's very unfortunate."

"I'd say so. I tried to teach them well. But my first apprentice ran off with my ex-wife, and I expelled the other two for making advances on my current wives."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..." She reeled from the shock of having inadvertently opened a can of worms—not lady troubles, apparently, but apprentice troubles.

"No, that's quite all right. Just the price I have to pay to be married to such gorgeous women," Oswald jokingly boasted to assuage her panic.

"Um, about confidentiality," Dahlia said, switching topics, "should I enter a magical contract at the temple?"

"You needn't do that. I would love for you to employ the techniques you learn from me in your creations. If you find a trustworthy assistant or even an apprentice of your own in the future, I'd be more than happy for you to teach them too. If or when that time comes, I trust you to choose wisely."

"I can't possibly thank you enough, Mr. Oswald, but surely fifty gold is nowhere near enough..."

"The passing of Mr. Carlo was a great loss to the Rossetti line. I only wish to do as much as I can to fill that void. Though, erm, there is one favor I would like to ask in exchange..." He trailed off, and behind his silver-rimmed glasses, those matching eyes darkened. "If I were suddenly no longer around, I would like for you to pass on my craft to my son. Of course, I shall put it in writing that he must pay you the same amount I charged you. Please tell Mr. Ivano as well."

"Me? Mentor *your* son?"

“Yes. He is currently studying magical toolmaking in high school, aspiring to be a toolmaker in his own right someday. So, in case anything were to happen to me, I ask you to teach him as I shall teach you.”

“Mr. Oswald, are you perhaps in poor health?”

“Oh, no, nothing of the sort. But I will say that my work makes me keenly aware of my own age. One misstep while performing techniques like composite sköll enchantment will send me to the grave.”

Her first thought had been illness, but it seemed that Dahlia had made herself worry for no reason. All the same, she couldn't help but ruminate on his words. Composite sköll enchantments must take not only a big magical toll, but a great physical one as well. And though it was a passing comment, it had already piqued her curiosity. “Is applying multiple enchantments really that difficult?”

“There are many ways to do so, but the easiest would be to use sealsilver as lining.”

“Sealsilver, you say?” The special metal was primarily used for making magically sealed boxes, and Dahlia knew that it couldn't be used in composite form.

“But not to enchant something already enchanted,” Oswald explained, confirming her suspicions. “Form the sealsilver to the adjoining parts and sandwich it in between. It requires a delicate touch with magic, but this way, the connecting parts can be clad in the metal, and it only requires fixation. If the magic isn't too strong, it can be completely sealed too.”

“And if the magic is stronger?”

“In addition to affixing a sealsilver lining, one could also specify a direction with the enchantment so that the magical properties do not repel each other. For example, in the case of my chilling fan, the compositely enchanted wind and ice magic flows in separate directions, then is piped in and mixed together right before output.”

Oswald's explanation was nothing short of revelatory for Dahlia. Only now did she realize that sealsilver was neither to be used as enchantment material nor to be painted on, but rather used as is and fixed into place—a simple technique,

yet never had she connected the dots before. For Oswald to explain the process in such a nonchalant manner demonstrated just how experienced a toolmaker he was.

“It is also possible to use materials with high magic resistance instead, but those are quite hard to come by. If the item were particularly powerful, one could encase the whole thing in a magical barrier and subsequently apply magic on top as well. However, that would require the services of a rather powerful mage,” he reasoned.

Unfortunately for Dahlia, she had yet to encounter a tool that contained so much magic.

Oswald continued, “I shall have you attempt it sooner or later. Oh, but if you are going to try your hand at composite enchantment in your tower, it should be perfectly safe with regular materials. I would recommend having someone accompany you just in case, however.” He’d seen right through her; Dahlia had just been thinking about attempting a composite enchantment as soon as she got home.

“I’ll do my best to be careful.”

“Yes, I would prefer that you not depart this realm before I do.”

“Er, I’m sure I’ll be fine!”

“You never know what shall happen. It’s better to be safe than sorry, wouldn’t you agree?” he advised her sagely. “In any case, it’s as much for your sake as it is for mine or that of my craft. It would be a real shame not to be able to pass it on.”

Oswald’s words evoked memories of Carlo, Dahlia’s father and mentor. His instruction was overflowing with patience and kindness; he always welcomed questions and allowed her to experiment as much as her magical abilities permitted. Their workspace, too, had never been out of order or lacking supplies. It wasn’t until she grew up that she understood just how blessed she had been to have someone like her father to mentor her and cultivate her dreams of becoming a magical toolmaker. And it was precisely because of that understanding that she was sure Oswald’s son would rather learn from his own father and that it would be better for him that he did.

“Very well, Mr. Oswald. I’m happy to accept your request,” she agreed with a bow. “I’m just curious, though: since your son is in high school already, wouldn’t it be fine for you to mentor him?” High school was just the time that many people became apprentices if they were serious about toolmaking.

“It would be if it weren’t for, well, the fact that he wants little to do with me. He’s at that age, you know? He currently boards at school and doesn’t come home very often.”

“A bit of teenage rebellion, I see. I’ve heard that it’s rather common with boys.”

“It certainly seems so. I’m sure it must be hard, what with my third wife being little more than ten years older than him.”

The way he so casually dropped that comment had Dahlia tongue-tied for a moment. But it wasn’t as if she couldn’t understand. If her own father had remarried, and to a woman so young, Dahlia would certainly have found it difficult to make conversation, let alone live at the Green Tower. The more she let her imagination run, the fewer words she found with which to respond.

Oswald let out a brief sigh. “I can only hope that it’s something time shall mend. I would love to be able to share a glass of scorpio with him someday.”

“Wow, scorpio?” As the name suggested, scorpio was a high-proof liquor bottled with a whole scorpion inside—the sight of which was enough to make Dahlia shy away from it. Yet she couldn’t back down when Marcello dared her to take a shot. It tasted clean, like a good vodka should, with the creature inside imparting no discernible flavor.

“I have a hard time finding a kindred *spirit*, so to speak. See, my wives are instead fond of wine and ale, and the same goes for my friends. I just wish I had someone with whom I could sip some scorpio, man to man,” he lamented.

It seemed that Oswald preferred the strong stuff, whereas Dahlia would have expected him to be a connoisseur of wine. Try as she might, she couldn’t think of anyone she knew who loved scorpio. Marcello drank anything alcoholic, but there was little chance that he would get along with Oswald.

“Having said that, I’m happy to have the chance to be a teacher to you, Miss

Dahlia. I'm sure it will be something I can boast about to Mr. Carlo when I see him on the other side."

"Boast about how I became your apprentice?"

"That is an honor I dare not receive. If I were to claim you as my apprentice, your father would huck magic crystals down upon me from the heavens. That is not the way I'd like to go."

Dahlia couldn't help laughing at the exaggeration. Her father was more likely to throw out his back first. "As peeved as he might be initially, I'm sure Father would be able to laugh at it in the end."

"I shan't be taking that chance! Do you know what his nickname was back in his college days? 'Uragano,' they called him."

"They did? *My* father?" She was rather taken aback. It was a term to liken someone to a tempest or a calamity, neither of which matched her image of Carlo. Had he really been so different in his youth?

"Sure did. He may have been graceful and dependable to his fellow students, but when it came to magical tools, oh, you'd best believe it was fitting..." Oswald stared off into the distance. "One time in the research group, he set off to create an apparatus for cleaning buildings. By joining four pairs of water and air crystals in series, he created a tool that could launch water at high pressure. The only trouble was, the end product was so powerful that he blew a gaping hole in our school building."

"Four pairs of crystals? In *series*?!" Though Dahlia had recently found even more respect for her father, she was now convinced that he'd been off his rocker.

Running magic crystals in series was a way to amplify their power, with the trade-off being decreased output duration—exactly like batteries in her previous life. That made much sense to Dahlia. She, too, had experimented in college with combining water and air crystals and running two pairs in series. The resulting stream of water had been powerful enough to crush a slab of stone.

But running four pairs in series? It would be enough power to bore through a

mountain! What had possessed Carlo to think that would clean walls? He should've known that it'd pierce through walls as though through paper. And why hadn't he tested it out before putting it into action?

"What—if at all—was Father thinking?"

"In his own words, he 'wanted to find out.' Every member of the Magical Tool Research Group was as zealous as he was, and so nobody stopped him. If anything, they were happy to gather all the crystals for Mr. Carlo."

Just hearing that flimsy reason made her head ache, but Dahlia supposed everyone else there was to blame too. There was one thing, though—Oswald seemed privy to too many details. "Mr. Oswald, were you perhaps..."

"Yes, I was a member of the club as well. I was in charge of materials at the time," he revealed with a devilish grin. Oswald could have prevented the whole incident, but Dahlia surmised that, more likely than not, he'd worn the same impish smile as he urged her father along with his experiment.

"Did they not suspend or otherwise punish my father for his antics?"

"No, not really. They were *our* antics at that point, and many in the group were from noble backgrounds anyway, so the repair bills were nothing we couldn't handle. Most importantly, though, our advisor stuck her neck out for us."

"That advisor wouldn't be Lina Lauren, would it?"

"Oh, you're familiar with her?"

"I had the pleasure of working as her assistant for nearly two years after my graduation." Dahlia had been a member of the club too, but never had she expected that both she and her father had been in the care of the same elderly professor. At least, neither Carlo nor Lina had ever mentioned it. Carlo had always been extremely polite when addressing Lina, but Dahlia presumed it was because Lina was the wife of a baron and had taken his daughter under her wing.

"After we punched that hole in the building and made a mess of the lab, Professor Lina ran around making amends for us, and Mr. Carlo said he felt that he owed her a great deal. Perhaps that's where he got his habit of putting

others in his debt.”

“Wow. This is all news to me,” Dahlia muttered. The man she’d known was mild-mannered and kindhearted, a father who would do everything to keep his daughter safe. She never would have guessed that he’d used to plunge so recklessly into danger. Now it was evident where she’d gotten her love of experimenting and of tackling the seemingly impossible. Though it could have come from her grandparents as well, they had unfortunately passed before Dahlia had had the opportunity to ask them.

“Then it seems like Mr. Carlo was a good, sensible father to you—which, may I add, is a little surprising to me,” Oswald said, snickering. He didn’t have his usual composed smile but rather an almost wicked sneer.

“Mr. Oswald, that kind of joke is perhaps too soon for me.”

“Please forgive me for being tactless.”

Her wound was still fresh and she couldn’t appreciate how lightly he talked about his own death. Oswald was still an active magical toolmaker with three wives and a son, and Dahlia hoped for him to enjoy life for a long time to come. “Thank you for your time, Mr. Oswald, and please take care of yourself.”

“I do try my best already, what with my wives and child always chiding me about it...” he responded with a tired smile on his face—a telltale sign of a husband and father.



“I finally got the chance to meet the Lady of the Green Tower, and she was such a charming person too,” Ermelinda said as she turned to Oswald. The two of them stood in front of the Goddess’s Right Eye; they had just seen their guests off.

The Lady of the Green Tower referred to none other than Dahlia, who was already the subject of chatter among Oswald’s wives. Back in the day, when his ex-wife and his employee had abandoned him, Oswald had vacillated between putting an end to his business and putting an end to his life. Carlo had thrown him a lifeline. It was at that time that he’d first met the then-little lady at the Green Tower. These were not tales of the past, but rather a debt Oswald had

yet to discharge.

“Quite so. She is even lovelier than when last I saw her,” he replied. It had only been a month, but there had already been a stark transformation. The zeal and ardor that marked youth tended to bring drastic change, but that splendor was only apparent with age. “Let’s head home. Beautiful wine and beautiful stars await us, my love.”

“I certainly hope you’re not hurrying home for work...”

“Absolutely not. I would never break a promise to my wife unless it were a matter of life and death—or an urgent summons to the castle,” he affirmed, much to his wife’s delight.

Being a purveyor of magical tools to the nobility, a chairman with constant business at the castle, and a baron—these were all great accomplishments that he hadn’t had when he was young. But one thing unproven was his ability to hold on to the people important to him. It had been a bolt out of the blue when his ex-wife and employee had eloped. Oswald had sworn his love to one and entrusted the whole store to the other, so he had never had so much as an inkling he would be betrayed in that manner.

It was all because of Carlo that he’d managed to get back on his feet, remarry, and find new apprentices—though that last hadn’t panned out very well either, as Oswald’s new apprentices had attempted to woo his new wives too. Perhaps beauty was both a blessing and a curse, or perhaps he brought misfortune on his wives. He’d chalked it up to his own inadequacy and began devoting all that he had to becoming a better husband, a better proprietor, a better chairman, a better baron, a better man. Before he knew it, he had become all those things and was worthy of being deemed successful.

But was he right to be so dedicated to pleasing his wives, to being present whenever they needed him? It was a question he couldn’t yet answer; certainly, the absence of complaints from them didn’t mean he was perfect. If only Carlo was still around, then Oswald could have sought his advice.

While he was ruminating on the past, Ermelinda went straight to the point. “My dear, are you thinking of taking Chairwoman Rossetti as your fourth wife?”

“Heavens forbid,” Oswald refuted instantly, but Ermelinda’s grass-hued eyes

narrowed in suspicion.

“She seems very much your type, I must say.”

“You wouldn’t be wrong to say so. But I’d be pummeled by my dear friend in the afterlife when I arrived, after getting torn to shreds by a certain black hound.”

“Oh, dear, we wouldn’t want that!” she said, laughing heartily at his remark about Volf.

“How about you, Linda? What thought you of the allegedly handsomest man in the capital? He had spectacles on today, but you’ve probably seen him come by as a customer before.”

“He’s not my type,” Ermelinda replied, shaking her head. “I prefer older men with silver hair and eyes, you know?”

“I’d say that’s quite the niche if I weren’t counting my blessings.” He may have launched the first strike, but her counterattack had won the battle.

“Speaking of whom, he seemed quite wary by the way he glared at you when we parted.”

“I had a bit of fun riling them up, you see.”

“Be sure not to get carried away, lest they resent you.”

“The capital’s handsomest lad would resent me? Now that would be a badge of honor, given that I’m a married man several times over.”

“Oh, Oswald Zola, you can be so childish!” she quipped. As ironic as it was being treated like a child by someone twenty-odd years his junior, Oswald could but laugh. After all, she was right. She continued, “But, um, if the Lady of the Green Tower were to have affection for you, what would you do then?”

“Very flattering that you would even posit the notion, but I guarantee you that it will never happen.”

Dahlia had managed to craft fairy glass spectacles and a sköll bracelet for Volf, despite the fact that she lacked the necessary magic and skill. It didn’t take a genius to guess how or why, yet Volf was completely oblivious to her feelings. Oswald thought he ought to give the boy a swift kick in the pants, though he

realized the alternative—being a silent observer—would be that much more entertaining.

“I’ve heard your guarantees regarding matters like these aren’t quite dependable,” said Ermelinda.

“Now who did you hear that from? Caterina? Or perhaps Fiore?”

“Both, actually. It was you who said you wouldn’t take a third wife, yet it was also you who so kindly took me in.”

“That speaks volumes about just how alluring you are. Besides, it’s completely untrue that I ‘took you in’ as if you were some sort of stray animal. No, I wanted you by my side so I could devote to you my love.”

“Aw, darling!” she squealed. “But please know that I would have no objections if you did want a fourth.”

Reminiscent of spring buds, Ermelinda’s resolute eyes were filled with fervor for him. That was true of Caterina’s verdant and Fiore’s jade eyes too; they differed from Dahlia’s in that respect. Only a fool would lust for more.

“No, my dear, I’m satisfied with the amount of love I both give and receive.”

“Is that right? Here I was hoping for more,” she said with a coquettish smile.

Oswald smiled back, happiness welling up in his heart. “Then I shall devote my heart and soul to you.”

Imitation Ravioli and the Witch's Cottage

Though Ivano had requested that Dahlia's carriage drop him off at the Merchants' Guild so he could finish some work, the Rossetti Trading Company was unbudging about sending him straight home. Now, only Volf and Dahlia remained in the carriage as it headed for the Green Tower.

"Do you have plans for the rest of the evening, Volf?"

"No, not really. Had I remembered to bring a change of clothes, I would've asked you out to get some food."

"Oh, no, it's my fault for summoning you even though you were so busy today," Dahlia apologized, surmising that he must've rushed out the door after training with his squad. It was already past dinnertime too. "Would you like to come over and test out the new camp stove? Mr. Fermo and I made a few modifications to its materials to lighten it further. I've got a meal prepared already as well."

"I'd love to! Thanks for having me again," Volf said readily. Perhaps talk of the new and improved camp stove had caught his attention; he was much less reserved than usual today. But whatever the cause, Dahlia was just glad that he was coming over, and she began going over tonight's menu in her head.

Back at the tower, she lit up the magical lantern at the entryway before Volf offered to carry it. He took careful steps as they headed up to the second floor, and the light illuminated the stone stairs from a higher angle than Dahlia was accustomed to. She'd only realized just how dark the staircase was since the day they'd made the Creeping Blade, so she was glad to have his help.

The living room was more than bright enough once the two magical lamps were lit, though now another problem was apparent—even with the windows open and the cooling fan switched on, the hot, humid air clung to the room.

After offering her guest a damp towel and a glass of white wine, Dahlia hurried to her room to change into something more comfortable. After all, her

businesswear was ill-suited for cooking but especially so given what would be on the menu tonight. Then, she suddenly remembered something buried in the back of her closet, dug it out, and returned downstairs. “Hey, Volf, you probably shouldn’t get that shirt dirty, right?”

“It’s no biggie if I do; I’ve got more in the barracks.” Though he’d taken off his jacket, the shirt underneath was white. No need to give the launderers a hard time by getting tough grease stains on the bright white fabric.

“Here, try this on if you’d like. I haven’t worn it before,” she said as she handed him a breathable black T-shirt, perfect for the sticky summer weather. It should have fit him loosely, probably one up from his usual size.

“Erm...whose is this?”

“It’s mine. It’s nice and cool wearing it to sleep,” she replied with some hesitancy. “But like I said, it’s brand new! I haven’t even tried it on before!”

“Much appreciated. Truth be told, I’m dripping in sweat right now...” Volf lifted up his arm, revealing his soaked-through shirt. It was no surprise, though, as neither his shirt nor his trousers were appropriate for the weather.

“You really ought to have a summer uniform.”

“Well, it’s not often we wear our dress uniforms when it’s this hot out. When we have ceremonies in the summer, we usually slip towels down our backs and try to look as unfazed as possible.”

“What’s that? Some sort of training?”

“Something to build composure, I suppose. After the ceremony, whoever loses their composure has to buy drinks for whoever sweated the most. We get pretty excited over it.”

“Oh, so it’s like a bit of competition?”

“Yeah, exactly. Hard to stay sane without some kind of reward in sight.”

Dahlia feared the knights would get heat stroke in those clothes under the blazing sun. “If only there were some kind of tool that could keep you guys cool.”

“I’ll say. I’ve heard that before my time, someone tried stuffing an ice crystal

down the back of his shirt, only to get frostbitten instead of cooled off.”

Some people went to extremes to fight the heat. It was hard using an ice crystal on its own like that; the stronger the output was, the shorter it lasted. Dahlia still felt sorry about freezing Volf’s hand with the last shortsword experiment. “Does your order run on a fairly tight budget?”

“We’ve got some leeway, but like anyone else, we’re always told to cut costs. Instead of ordering clothes that we seldom wear, I’m sure they’d rather spend the money on things like weapons or expedition supplies.”

“I hope the camp stove will come in handy, then.”

“Thank you very much for improving the meals on our journeys, Ms. Rossetti,” he said in his best business voice, and the two shared a giggle.

Dahlia moved to the kitchen, leaving Volf to get out of his damp clothes. Along with a pair of the newly improved camp stoves, she retrieved from the refrigerator a platter and a vessel of quick-pickled vegetables, making sure to drain the brine from the mixture of cabbage, radish, and carrots before plopping them onto a plate.

Just as she was taking some ale out from the fridge, Volf came by and helped bring everything to the table. “Are these some kind of ravioli? I’ve never seen anything like them before.”

“Um, yeah, they’re something like meat-filled imitation ravioli? It’s ground pork and vegetables in a thin flour wrapper.” The truth was that they were gyoza, but she gave him a roundabout explanation, as the pan-fried dumplings she knew from her previous life didn’t exist in this world.

Ravioli culture flourished here in the royal capital of Ordine. Its most ordinary form had a meat, vegetable, and cheese filling. However, many varieties were available, like seafood ravioli, healthier ravioli stuffed only with vegetables, and even dessert ravioli stuffed with fruit and jam. Sauces were just as plentiful. Tomato and cheese was the default choice, but more adventurous options such as chili sauce with basil and sweet tangy drizzles were also popular. The ravioli was such a staple that grocers always stocked jarred sauces and premade pasta sheets.

However, only gyoza were gyoza. As Dahlia had found herself with a free afternoon, she had decided to make them from scratch. She had mixed plain flour, water, and elbow grease to form a dough. After flattening balls of dough into discs, she had rolled them out as thin as possible to get wrappers. Gyoza had been a favorite of her father's, and that being the case, Dahlia knew the process by heart.

Her plan had been to serve gyoza if Volf were to join her for dinner. If he hadn't, she'd have stocked up her freezer. With the possibility of dinner with Volf in mind, she'd made two varieties: one standard—with pork, garlic chives, and cabbage—and the other seafood—a mixture of shrimp, onion, and cabbage. However, as she'd toiled away and filled the tray, she'd realized she had made so many that there wasn't even enough space in her freezer to store them all. She would've had to eat gyoza for days if Volf hadn't decided to come, so she was most grateful for his presence.

"Meat-filled imitation ravioli? Huh. Well, whatever they are, I'm excited!" he enthused, unwittingly putting pressure on her.

Before they ate, though, Dahlia set two camp stoves on the table. Based on their discussion last time, the improved model now featured a larger pot but was still much smaller and lighter than the compact magical stove. The day after they'd spoken, Dahlia had set about using scrap magisteel and making a pot with those S-shaped linkages the four of them had talked about.

After Fermo had designed the lid, which doubled as a frying pan, he'd also applied a coating to the cooking surface. Dahlia had tested it thoroughly and had found that, not only was it perfect for grilling meat, the non-stick surface was so slick that she could even make the most delicate omelets with ease. Fermo's wife, Barbara, had tried it out as well and had given an absolutely glowing review.

Though they weren't obvious, the stove itself had received some major improvements as well. Its center of gravity had been lowered so it would be even harder to tip over. That, combined with eight tacky pieces of gumfoot on the underside, ensured that the stove would be stable on uneven terrain.

Dahlia had also learned an important lesson in safety when the Frozen Blade

had encased Volf's hand in ice. She knew she had to account for users with particularly powerful magic and for the possibility that they might camp near dry brush, and so the special material that reflected the heat from the fire crystals had been thickened as well. The lockout mechanism had also been strengthened so the stove couldn't be turned on if it got bumped while in transport. As far as Dahlia could tell, she had done her utmost with the camp stove.

"Let's get cooking, then." She placed a layer of gyoza on the bottom of the pot and turned on the stove. After the pot heated through, she added about half a cup of water and covered it with the combination lid/skillet.

"Is that enough water?"

"Yes, just enough to steam up the ravioli before frying them," Dahlia explained. While Volf was staring intently at the pot, she filled his mug full of ruby ale. "We have about five minutes to wait, so why don't we raise our glasses in the meantime?"

"Good call. I think it's your turn today."

"Then, um, to memorizing all the castle etiquette and for good luck tomorrow."

"Here's to a prosperous future for the Rossetti Trading Company and good luck tomorrow. Cheers!"

The ruby ale had a distinct tartness that cut through its rich body. After the refreshing bubbly sensation cleared, a hint of fruity acidity remained on the palate. The nose was somewhat subdued—the ale had been chilled a little too long—but there was nothing that quenched thirst quite like a frosty beer. Dahlia figured that she could take her time to enjoy the subtleties of her second or third mug after it had warmed up a little, only to realize she was thinking like a heavy drinker.

Enjoying the beer afforded her enough time to progress to the next step of the cooking process. After making sure the gyoza had been steamed thoroughly, she removed the lid to let the water cook off and finish the dumplings. "Now we let them brown a bit."

Volf eyed them suspiciously. “Erm, Dahlia?”

“Trust me, this is how it’s supposed to go.” The water had drawn out some of the flour from the wrappers and formed a slurry, and after the moisture had evaporated, the gyoza were now bound together by a crispy layer of starch, like little wings that sprouted from their backs. Paired with that beautiful golden-brown surface, these were signs of utter failure in ravioli but perfection in gyoza. She plated them up and placed an assortment of condiments before Volf, including salt, pepper, vinegar, chili oil, fish sauce, tomato sauce, and grated hard cheese. As Dahlia hadn’t had enough time to make a dipping sauce, she’d brought out all the condiments she had on hand, even if not all of them were appropriate. “They should be well-seasoned already, but feel free to dip them in whatever you like.”

“Oh. Uh, sure.”

It was obvious that Volf was a little apprehensive, so she decided to lead by example. After separating one dumpling from the batch with her chopsticks, Dahlia plunged one end into a dish of vinegar, chili oil, and fish sauce and bit it in half. The delectable aroma of pork and vegetables filled her nose and overwhelmed her senses, while the juices scalded her tongue ever so slightly. Meanwhile, the tender wrapper yielded gently, contrasting with the crackly “wings” and crunchy fried bottom—the textures were an experience of their own. And though the wrapper was on the thicker side, it was actually ideal if one were treating the gyoza as the main course rather than as an appetizer.

After Dahlia finished savoring the dumpling, she downed her mug of chilled ruby ale in one go. There was hardly a better pairing, and she knew that from two lives’ worth of experience. Before she reached for another piece, she turned to Volf. His eyes were shut tight as he chewed his food; bliss was written all over his face. As his glass had naught but lacing left, she silently topped him up with more ruby ale.

“This is fantastic. Were they made with a fancy cut of meat?”

“No, just cheap minced pork and regular veggies.”

“Do they serve these in restaurants?”

“Uh, perhaps abroad. I’m not too sure about anywhere local, though, sorry.”

“Wow. Whenever I come around, if it’s not a classic done well, then it’s a completely new dish. This must be the witch’s cottage in the woods.”

The Witch’s Cottage in the Woods was a well-known children’s book. The story was about a hungry young boy who couldn’t wait for supper. He wandered into the woods, though his parents had warned him never to set foot there, and soon came upon a small cottage. The boy knew better than to invite himself into a stranger’s home, but he just couldn’t resist the delicious scent coming from inside. There, a witch who he had never seen or heard of before offered him all the food he could eat. When the boy was full, he thanked the witch before heading home, only to realize he couldn’t leave. What was supposed to be the moral of the story? That one should listen to one’s parents or that gluttony is a sin? The less-than-happy ending had always been a bit of a head-scratcher for Dahlia.

“If that’s the case, are you going to end up all round and plump?”

“Monsters are going to have me for lunch if I get that big.”

“Well, you wouldn’t have to worry about that—you wouldn’t be able to get out of the tower in the first place.” The last scene in the fairy tale had the boy swell up into a sphere so that he was unable to fit through the cottage door. It seemed less like the consequence of overeating and more like a hex of the witch’s.

“So you’re saying it’d be better for me to get to that size?”

“Too bad you’re the type that doesn’t gain weight no matter how much you eat.” The two of them shared a laugh as they finished their first round of gyoza. “Here, try some of this while I fry up some more.”

“Thanks!” Volf said as he helped himself to some of the quick-pickles. He always seemed younger than he really was. The way he was chewing so thoroughly suggested how much he enjoyed the pickled vegetables as well. “Oh, these are great too. I eat a lot of preserved vegetables, but they’re nothing like these. There’s a hint of...citrus that works really well.”

“I think that’s the yuzu you’re tasting.”

“That’s what it is? I’ve never had it used like this before. Whenever I think of

yuzu, I think of it steeped in spirits.”

“Oh, like yuzu liqueur? I enjoy that too. What about you?”

“Yeah, I like to cut it with a bit of hot water. Really warms you up in the winter.”

That gave Dahlia an idea. She could mix up some yuzu, neutral spirits, and a good deal of rock sugar soon to have it ready for winter. Yuzu liqueur with hot water would be great paired with miso stew. Unfortunately, in all the years since her reincarnation, Dahlia had yet to see any miso in this world, and so her second idea was to pair the hot cocktail with flounder preserved in oil.

As she was frying up the second batch of dumplings, Volf contemplated the pot and stove. “Do you think I could dehydrate these and take them on an expedition?”

“I don’t think that’ll work. Frozen, yes, but dehydrated, no.” There was no way they’d dry properly, and bringing frozen gyoza on a trip was a different kind of camping altogether.

“Now that I think about it, calling them ‘imitation ravioli’ seems almost disrespectful. With the way they’re folded up, do you think ‘leaf wraps’ would work?”

“The problem with that is there *are* already dishes that are made of stuffed leaves.”

“Oh, that’s true. Hmm...”

Volf seemed like he was truly racking his brains over this issue, which made Dahlia feel a little guilty. Maybe it was time for her to come clean. “What about ‘gyoza,’ like my father used to call them?”

“‘Gyoza,’ huh? That’s a fun and exotic-sounding name.” Dahlia served up a new plate of dumplings and Volf thanked her before taking a bite into one. Once again, he took his time chewing and reveling in every bite, as if he had put the world around him on pause, then washed it all down with big gulps of ale. He let out a satisfied sigh as he basked in the flavors, then burst out laughing for some reason. “Dahlia...”

“What is it, Volf?” She paused with her chopsticks still in her right hand and her mug of ruby ale in her left.

“These are amazing too. What’s in them? Shrimp?”

“That’s right. I made two versions today. These are the shrimp and vegetables. Which ones do you like better?”

“That’s a seriously difficult question to answer.”

“If that’s the case, then let’s alternate between the two. We’ve still got tons left.”

“They’re both so good. How can I possibly choose between them?”

“All right, all right. I’ll make other varieties next time. We could do chicken, or just vegetables, or even one batch with cheese.”

“Do you think you have any easier questions for me?” Though he furrowed his brows, there was a slobbering grin on his face.

The next tray of gyoza were spiced up with a bit of chili pepper, but she chose to keep that a surprise. She also contemplated deep-frying them or boiling them.

“I didn’t know I’d stepped into the witch’s tower in the woods,” Volf mumbled and then heaved a sigh, drawing a roaring laugh from Dahlia.

Volf must’ve been very fond of the gyoza and beer—at least, so it seemed from the way he was lounging on the sofa with a slightly bulging belly. “Bite after bite of dumpling, mug after mug of ale—boy, what a meal,” he said. The knight looked like a lion tuckered out after devouring his prey.

“I’m so glad to hear you enjoyed yourself.” Dahlia couldn’t help but giggle at the sight.

“At this rate, it really will be just a matter of time before I’m rotund.” Life might have been a little more peaceful for him if that were the case, given that he wouldn’t have to go out into the field. Otherwise, the monsters that he’d be facing would get a good nibble on him.

The scent of gyoza lingered in the room, so Dahlia turned the cooling fan on

higher before going to retrieve the red-and navy-striped cups they'd bought together. She put a large chunk of ice and a big splash of estervino in each of the squat, translucent glasses, then set them on the coffee table before taking a seat on the sofa herself.

"Hey, Dahlia? Are you still feeling a bit down?"

"Oh, um...just a bit." All the eating and drinking had helped, and it wasn't as if Dahlia was consumed by her emotions, yet Volf saw right through her.

His golden eyes narrowed ever so slightly, casting a look of concern upon her. "You're still thinking about what Oswald said earlier, aren't you?"

"Yeah. I now know full well just how little I know. I'd dreamed of being a better toolmaker than even Father was, but, well, it seems I've got a ways to go." Dahlia had felt the utmost gratitude to Oswald for pointing out her overconfidence, but that didn't mean it had hurt any less. She couldn't stand the ache she felt when she wished her father were still around to teach her more; thinking that way wouldn't help Carlo rest in peace and, frankly, was a little disrespectful to Oswald.

"You kinda jumped at his offer as soon as he made it, but are you sure about Oswald?"

"I'm extremely grateful to have this chance to absorb his knowledge, since there was much Father had yet to pass on to me when he died."

"What about any other magical toolmaker?"

"Hmm. My father was the best toolmaker I knew, but now Oswald is the best I know. Besides, I doubt there is anyone out there willing to teach their craft to a complete outsider." There were undoubtedly powerful toolmakers in the castle, and mages who crafted tools as well as spells must have had some very special techniques. However, Dahlia was acquainted with none of them, and even if she were, there would be little chance that any of them would teach anyone other than their own apprentices. "And there's something that I really need to learn too."

"What's so important?"

"If I can learn how to apply multiple enchantments to one tool, then I'll have a

better chance at making a magical sword, right?”

“Oh, you’re right!”

“And if I learn to raise my magic level, not only should I be able to make even more powerful swords, there will be so many more tools that I can make—that’s why I instantly said yes to him.”

Volf’s expression darkened as he lowered his gaze. Oswald’s asking price of fifty gold was indeed no trifling sum, and Dahlia planned to take it from her own savings, but nevertheless, it was something she should’ve discussed with Ivano as a fellow member of the trading company. She couldn’t blame them for thinking her rash. “Dahlia, you’re not stretching yourself too thin, are you?”

“Don’t worry, I made sure to get all the details from Oswald. In the meantime, I’m not going to attempt anything out of my reach, and I’m not going to try any dangerous enchantments. That’ll mean that your new glasses will have to wait, though. Sorry about that.”

“Never mind that; I’m in no rush. More importantly, what I’m trying to get at is that I’m worried about Oswald...”

“It’s true that he’s getting up there in years, and he did say that enchanting had taken a toll on his body, but I’m certain that he has much more mana than I do.” Though Oswald was still active in the profession, he had bemoaned the fact that his vigor was not quite what it once was. Dahlia presumed Volf was worried about the dangers involved if Oswald were to teach her how to enchant with rare materials, so she revealed the request Oswald had made of her.

“There’s also, um, something he asked of me, you see. He said that if anything were to happen to him, he would want me to pass on his craft to his son, who is currently studying our trade in high school. Just to prepare for the unexpected, like what happened with my father, he said.”

“I see...”

“With the way Father passed away so suddenly, I...”

“I get it. Not to mention, that’s something only a fellow toolmaker can do for him anyway,” Volf sympathized. “Wait. Doesn’t Oswald have his own apprentices?”

“It seems like he only has an assistant at the moment.” Dahlia couldn’t bear to tell Volf that Oswald’s first apprentice had run off with his ex-wife or that he’d fired the other two for coming on to his current wives. She wondered for a moment if Oswald’s luck with apprentices was inversely proportional to his luck with women, but she quickly erased the cruel thought from her mind.

“I suppose he wants his son to succeed him.”

“That’s what I think too. My own father left us before either of his apprentices was in a position to succeed him...” Her cube of ice clattered as she spoke, and she reached for her glass. Condensation trickled down the side, chilling her lips as she took a sip. The estervino had become both thinner in body and more muted on the palate—the result of the ice in the estervino—but that in turn made it much smoother and more satisfying after a hot day and a big meal.

“Huh. I vaguely remember my mother saying that she had more to teach me too,” he said, lost in thought as he likewise sipped his drink.

Seeing his tired smile as he reminisced, Dahlia blurted out a question before she’d given it enough thought. “Do you know what it might have been?”

“Though I trained to fight monsters, I didn’t learn a lot about bodyguarding or sword fighting against other people—which, ironically enough, was what my mother specialized in. Maybe I should brush up on those disciplines.”

“Are those important too?”

“I’d say so. I put off training in personal combat since I figured I don’t normally fight people, but now that I think about it, it might help since some monsters are humanoid in shape.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Like zombies and ogres, for example. Dullahans are humanoid too, but I haven’t fought one before. Oh, and cyclops, although they are quite a bit bigger than humans.”

Volf certainly had a point in that these monsters were all humanoid, though Dahlia wasn’t convinced that training to fight against people would help. How would he turn the undead into the truly dead? What weak spots did a headless

suit of armor have? And surely cyclops towered too tall for tactics meant for use against people. “There certainly are all kinds of different monsters...”

“Don’t forget all the mutant forms either. Some aren’t even obvious to the naked eye.” That was what made monsters the terrible force that they were. They were prone to adapting to their environment and circumstances, evolving into ever more formidable forms. Some were easily distinguished by sight alone, but just as many only revealed their true nature in battle or when they cast spells. It was that uncertainty that made monster hunting so dangerous. “Like the purple bicorn the other day. That had an incredible resistance to magic. Oswald might be able to make full use of it as material. I’ve actually got the Adventurers’ Guild butchering the whole thing right now since you mentioned that you wanted some bicorn horn last time.”

“Volf, don’t tell me you bought the whole darn thing.” He’d mentioned the fact as if it were a trifling matter, but bicorn horns were rare—a mutant bicorn exponentially more so. It must’ve cost him a pretty penny.

When Dahlia stared straight at him, Volf began crunching on the half-melted chunk of ice that had been in his glass. And when her eyes bulged out at him, he gulped everything down. “I know you said you wouldn’t so much as open the gates for me if I did so, but, well, I slew the thing, you know? Do you think you could make an exception just this once?”

Only now did she recall their conversation. It was right after Volf had come back from his titan frog expedition that she’d mentioned there were some materials she wanted, including a bicorn horn. She had known how guilty she’d feel if he actually went out and bought one for her, so she had made sure to let him know he wouldn’t be welcome in the Green Tower if he were to do so. However, she hadn’t expected him to take her words to heart, and she most certainly hadn’t expected him to repeat them back to her here and now. “Um...fine, I’ll take back what I said. But only if you tell me how much you paid for it.”

“Oh, y’know...they gave it to me for a steal as a reward for my services.”

“How much was it?”

Volf hesitated, but he knew she wouldn’t let it go. “Eleven gold.”

“I shall pay for it.”

As she did a quick mental check of whether she had that much saved up, Volf interlaced his fingers. He sat up straight, looked directly at Dahlia, and said in all earnest, “Could you consider it experimental material?”

“Explain.”

“Well, if I’m getting you to make a magical sword, I should supply you with these bicorn parts for you to experiment with. You can use whatever is appropriate for toolmaking. And if you make a profit from it, you can use the money to pay the tuition fees from Oswald.”

“You wouldn’t stand to gain anything from this.”

“On the contrary, I’ll be happy if it helps you to develop a magical sword. Plus, the technical knowledge you learn from Professor Oswald will also help in making swords, so I’m more than willing to pay for that. You’ll be the judge of whether it’s true, but I think he’ll make for a good teacher.”

“Professor Oswald” had a nice ring to it, Dahlia noted. Mutant bicorn horn was undeniably enticing, and Oswald might well know all about it. It’d be swell if she could use it for the sword as well. If she were to make a profit on the bicorn enchantments, then she could secretly add a few more enchantments to the sword as a way of returning Volf’s favor. Who knew? There might even be a quick return on the investment.

Dahlia relented, mostly because she knew Volf wasn’t about to budge either. “Very well. I’ll take advantage of your generosity just this time,” she said as she bowed. Volf absolutely lit up and laughed to himself in obvious relief, and she added, “It’d be great if you could find someone who could teach me a thing or two about swords as well.”

“That’s a great idea! I’ll check with my buddies,” he said. Dahlia knew nothing about sword fighting or martial arts, but it wasn’t as if a knight like Volf could train a commoner like herself. “Still, you’re able to craft such wonderful magical tools even without any instruction. In my eyes, you’re a proper toolmaker already.”

“No, it wasn’t until very recently that I learned to craft like I do now.” Dahlia

added a fresh piece of ice to her empty cup before slowly filling it with unfiltered estervino, causing the ice to swirl and make a pleasant clinking sound against the sides of the glass.

“Did your father not give you a lot of freedom?”

“I suppose both my father and ex-fiancé wanted me to learn to be levelheaded before I got myself into any serious danger, but I think they were just protective of me.”

“I can sympathize with them.”

“Well, look where this newfound freedom has gotten me.” Dahlia had brought to fruition every idea she’d had, which resulted in as many failures as successes. But despite causing a bit of trouble not only for Volf but for everyone around her, she had been able to continue producing tools that improved the lives of so many people. That in itself brought fun and boundless joy to her own life. “Still, I must say freedom is a nice feeling. No matter how wild my ideas may be, you never dismiss them and instead stay by my side.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt either, but of course I’m not going to dismiss your ideas. You’re the pro, not me.”

It was a comforting sentiment, but Dahlia realized she needed him to make his own judgments too. When she worked, she often thought of her previous life, and she couldn’t say for certain that those memories didn’t influence her for the worse. “It’s fun being able to make whatever I want, but in the event that I inadvertently come up with a bad idea that could hurt myself or others...”

“I don’t think you’d create anything like that.”

“I certainly hope not. But if I *do* make something that I shouldn’t, I ask that you stop me in my tracks.”

“Okay, I promise that I will if that ever happens. But if I think you’re on to a good idea, then I’ll be sure to let you know as well.”

Dahlia didn’t doubt that Volf would stick to his word, though she had a feeling that he’d disregard potential problems and encourage her if it were something to do with magical swords. “I’ll do my best not to create a magical sword that’ll make us enemies either.”

“You don’t seem so sure...”

“Hey, you had a hand in it too!” The two swords they had made together—the Blade of the Dark Lord’s Minion and the Creeping Blade—could hardly be considered safe to handle, so she knew she had to study under Oswald in order to ensure that her next one was. However, these were the first man-made magical swords in history. There were no references or research materials to draw upon. She was a trailblazer, and along with that status came a certain danger. “If I can help it, I won’t make any magical tool or sword that would wrong anyone. The last thing I want is to be the victim of a witch hunt.”

Volf cackled with cup in hand. “Rest assured—the Dark Lord protects all his minions.”

Cloudy with a Chance of Monsters

“Looks like it’s about to pour.”

Though the sun was just setting, the skies remained gray, the air humid, heavy, and hot. Beside the highway were members of the Order of Beast Hunters making camp after an expedition. It was hardly the best of locations in which to do so, what with the rugged terrain providing barely enough room for everyone. But at least there was space for tents, and discomfort would soon yield to fatigue once the soldiers lay down.

They began pitching tents but made sure never to leave themselves too vulnerable while doing so. Although there were fewer knights than usual on this expedition, the tents nearly touched one another. The steeds commanded a great deal of real estate, but they, too, needed to rest. All in all, it was undeniable that the campsite was cramped. Volf dreaded the inevitability of hearing his neighbors’ snoring throughout the night.

The tents went up not a moment too soon, and Volf and the others were able to head inside and get out of their armor. But before he could get into fresh clothes, he needed to peel off the shirt that had been underneath his armor, as it was drenched in sweat. He knew, though, that a dry shirt was but a fleeting comfort—in merely hours it would be clinging to him again. It would soon rain and get cold, and his shirt would get wet. Or, if the rain stopped, the weather would turn hot and muggy; he’d sweat through his shirt and it would get wet. The men could have showered if they’d been back in the barracks, but they had no such luxury here.

“Hey, Dorino, the back of your left arm is bleeding. Not a deep cut, but it’s rather long,” Randolph called out to the knight.

“Damn, I thought I was just dripping with sweat. Now that you mention it, it does kinda sting.” Dorino grimaced. He had just been about to get out of his shirt too.

Their designated targets today had been fangdeer. At first glance, they looked

harmless, but there was always more than met the eye. The brown deer were capable of strengthening magic and commanded a mighty kick. Of course, the name wasn't for naught, as they also possessed terrible fangs that gave festering bites. Worse still was the fact that they fought in herds, and if they won, they trampled their defeated opponents. It was said that this behavior served to assert their dominance; the losing party was guaranteed to feel it.

"If you assume they're as cute as they look, you'll be in for a surprise. Their hooves are narrow and stabby, and you'll be sure to feel them if you lose a fight to them, so avoid losing," the vice-captain, Griswald, had once said to a bunch of fresh recruits. All parties had looked awfully dispirited throughout the conversation, and Volf could understand why.

Luckily, Dorino hadn't been bitten by the fangdeer but rather just banged up during the tussle.

"I'll go get the priest to look at you. You don't want that to get infected," Randolph said.

"Nah, I'll go to him myself. The priest is a new guy, so he's probably dead tired from the trek."

"All right. I'll grab chow for you, then."

"Thanks, pal."

Volf and Randolph made their way to the chuckwagon. After they'd received their portions, the knight on duty turned to Volf with two extra sacks of rations in his hands. "Hate to bother you, but you think you could take these to the officers' tent for me?"

"Sure thing, but what's up?"

"See, the ice crystals got jostled out of the two cases of cheese, so the cheese is a goopy mess now. As luck would have it, they sat on top of everything else. And guess who's cleaning it up?" The three worst enemies of any expedition: heat, moisture, and mold.

"Ah. I'll come give you a hand after I drop off the rations."

Randolph volunteered as well. "I've got time to spare too."

“First you guys take care of the fangdeer all by yourselves, and now you want to scrub the wagon too? Hey, save some work for me here. Go enjoy your downtime,” the knight jovially quipped as he shooed the two of them away. They genuinely wanted to help, but the knight wouldn’t have any of it. That left them with only the delivery to make. A moderate breeze blew as the sky started to drizzle.

“Your evening meal, sir.”

“Oh, Volfred and Randolph, sorry for the trouble. I appreciate you bringing the rations here, but we’ll only be needing the vice’s portion and the wine. Please, help yourself to the rest,” said the elderly Captain Grato between hacking out coughs. The vice-captain had yet to return to the tent; word was that he was checking on the horses.

“Are you all right, sir? Let me get the priest—”

“No, no, I’m fine. It’s just that the back of my throat is a tad swollen, so I’ll have a hard time swallowing food. Nothing but a common cold. A stiff drink and a night’s rest will do me wonders.” Evening rations consisted of cheese, jerky, and rye—none of which had much moisture content to speak of, making them ill-suited for someone with a sore throat. The wind was picking up as well, meaning that cooking up a pot of soup outdoors was out of the question.

“We have a fire mage with us, so I’ll see if there’s anything warm we can cook up.”

“I appreciate your concern, really, but I’m fine. Cooking in the rain is a miserable task, and I’m not about to have someone use fire magic inside a tent. Remember how someone nearly burned down his tent when he tried using a fire crystal inside it?” Attempting to use a magic crystal on its own could instead result in the crystal manipulating the user’s magic, and it was especially difficult to control the strength of a stand-alone fire crystal. It would be ideal to have some sort of magical tool that was built for that specific purpose, but extra weight in a pack was every soldier’s common enemy.

The senior knight continued his coughing fit, yet he shook his head and refused treatment from a priest. He explained that a sore throat could only be

healed temporarily, as that stemmed from an illness and was not a wound. Not only that, but the captain would rather save the invaluable healing magic for their journey home. His reasons were sound, but Volf still worried for Grato; he looked as sick as he sounded, but no amount of persuasion changed that shake of his head to a nod.

When the two subordinates returned to their tent, Randolph rummaged through his sack for a small jar of honey. “If not for his cough, then for nourishment,” he said before heading out once again. As soon as he’d left, though, the rain came down harder. The strong breeze whistled through the branches and leaves now too, as if the forest itself was howling.

“Damn weather. Too hot in the afternoon, and now frigid,” said a voice. Replacing Randolph was Dorino, whose new shirt was sodden from the rain. And after a sneeze or three, he wrapped himself in a blanket.

Randolph wasn’t away for long, and when he returned, the three of them ate their evening fare of dried meat, hard rye, and heavily salted cheese. They gnawed and gnawed, but it took wine to wash it all down. Their dinner filled the stomach but hardly the soul.

Afterward, they went through their nightly routines and got in bed as soon as possible. There was no night watch, so instead, the men would have to wake up early and scout out and secure their surroundings before setting off. They might have already finished the hunt, but vigilance was still necessary as the way home promised no safety either.

“It’s coming down even harder...” Dorino muttered to himself, but just then—a moment as bright as the midday sun. Trailing a few seconds behind was the deep rumbling boom. A terrified trumpeting came from the knights’ mounts. Footsteps followed, and then came voices pacifying the animals.

“Sure hope the horses are okay... Should we go check?”

“I tried earlier, but they turned me away, saying something about the Scarlet Armors having done their work already and that we should hit the sack.”

The Scarlet Armors were the front liners who risked life and limb—quite literally—to break through enemy forces, earning them extra respect even from

fellow knights. Their day had indeed been tough. Heavy were the arms that had fought against the fangdeer, and even their bodies were loudly complaining of their fatigue. The other knights might have had a point in telling Volf and the others to seek rest.

Still, whatever was happening outside elicited curiosity, if not worry. The thunder and the rain, the coughing and sneezing, the frightened whinnying of horses and the soothing voices in turn—tired as Volf was, the sandman kept at arm's length.

Whether because the sweat from the afternoon's labors still clung to his body or because of the rain in the evening, the cold had seeped into his bones. Just as detestable to consider was the fact that if it stopped raining, he'd be in a pool of sweat again.

A sliver of light from a magical lantern seeped in from the entrance of the tent, and Volf stared at the barely lit ceiling with half-opened eyes. He recalled how, back when he'd first entered the order, he'd had to doggedly brush melted wax into the canvas of tents and wagon bonnets to keep them waterproof. Ever since Dahlia had invented her waterproof cloth, though, he could sleep soundly at night knowing that no water would ever seep in, and neither would their rations spoil or mold from moisture.

Volf wanted to spur on another major improvement like that, but for their meals this time. The first time he'd used a compact magical stove, he'd simply thought it was conducive to making good food. The next time, he'd thought about how practical it would be for expeditions. Hot food could prevent illnesses and discourage people from leaving the order, he'd thought. Now, though, experience had truly driven home the fact that the portable stoves were a necessity for these trips.

Their current rations were unsuitable for anyone having trouble swallowing food. But with a stove, they could at the very least have boiled some water to warm up in the cold rain—an impossibility up until now. After having used the camp stove, his eyes had been opened: there was a better way.

Dahlia's camp stove wasn't yet perfect, or so she claimed. She wanted it to cost less and had been revising the materials used through trial and error with

the help of Fermo, the small goods craftsman. As far as Volf was concerned, it was already fine as it was. In his eyes, rather than reducing costs further, the important thing was to make an improvement to their expeditions by presenting the stove to his captain.

As a guarantor, his name was attached to the Rossetti Trading Company. Some might have said that he was using his position to promote his own product or to make a profit for himself, but so be it, he thought. His reputation was a negligible sacrifice for a much greater good.

If the price of the camp stove did end up exceeding the order's budget, then he would make up the difference from his own pocket while keeping it a secret from Dahlia. He was sure that once his fellow knights tried the product, they would come to see the light as well.

Though it might be quite some time before the Order of Beast Hunters officially adopted the camp stove, Volf wanted it to be field-tested as soon as possible. At the very least, they would be able to cook some soup to soothe colds.

As he closed his eyes once more, he decided he would present the camp stove to Grato the moment he returned to the royal capital.

Official Delivery and the Order of Beast Hunters

Raindrops pitter-pattered on top of the carriage in which Dahlia, Ivano, and Lucia were riding to the castle. The representatives of the Rossetti Trading Company were to arrive first for the formalities accompanying their initial delivery to the Order of Beast Hunters. Merchants' Guildmaster Viscount Jedda and Tailors' Guildmaster Viscount Fortunato would join them some time afterward. When Dahlia had met with Fortunato in a briefing beforehand, he'd given her some good news in the form of his own offer to act on her behalf during these courtesy calls.

In the ten days since she'd first visited the Goddess's Right Eye, Dahlia had returned to see Caterina—Oswald's first wife—four times to take her lessons in castle etiquette. Caterina came from the family of a viscount, and her father had worked in the castle and was thus very familiar with the order. Though Dahlia had begun the ordeal feeling rather nervous, her teacher's patient tutelage had eased her concerns. Not only had she been instructed in proper manners, she had also learned the reasons that the rules had come to be, how to recover from committing mistakes, and how to apologize. On top of that, she had even received tips on how to dress and do her hair—truly a godsend.

As for Ivano, he came out of the experience with a great appreciation for Oswald's lessons; he sang high praises for his instructor's wealth of knowledge.

It wasn't easy for Dahlia to get everything under her belt, though. She had spent considerable effort reviewing the towering stack of flash cards that Oswald deemed mere "notes"—so much effort that she might even have come across a few cards in her dreams. The last time she had done so much rote memorization was back when she was a student. But somehow or other, Dahlia had managed to cram everything into her head; whether she could put everything she had learned into practice was another story. She couldn't help but wonder if Oswald's standards really were too high.

“Dahlia... How did a commoner who had been doing nothing but sewing gloves and socks come to be manager of the toe sock factory? And why is said manager now heading to the castle?” The woman with vivid green hair sitting next to Dahlia wore a lifeless smile as she did a last-minute review of her notes. This was Lucia, friend of Dahlia and assistant manager of the Fano Workshop. Her family business was in making small articles of clothing, but after producing prototypes of the toe socks, Lucia had been selected by Fortunato to take part in planning for their mass production. Now, a month later, she and Dahlia had both joined the ranks of the very few commoners ever invited to the castle.

“Um...because everything’s coming up for you?” Dahlia answered quietly.

Lucia’s dayflower-hued eyes drooped even lower. “It’s gotta be because one time, after staying up working all night, I went out to dinner with the others and accidentally blurted out to Mr. Fortunato that I dreamt of running my own atelier someday. Then he said that I was the most knowledgeable about toe socks and appointed me as chief right then and there...”

“Dreams really do come true...” muttered Dahlia.

“Good for you...” Ivano said, also in an undertone.

“You two really are awful liars, you know?”

Dahlia and Ivano both looked away from Lucia when they spoke. Their flattery was, of course, unpremeditated.

“Nearly all of the craftspeople at the Magical Garment Factory are older and much more experienced than I am! Do you know what kind of attention that gets me?!”

“Oh, um...”

“You sure have it rough as well, Ms. Lucia.”

The Magical Garment Factory was the name of the factory producing toe socks and drying insoles. It was quite a large building and many people were employed there as it had been built with future expansion and development in mind. It would’ve been ideal if Lucia’s father had accepted the position as head manager, but he was frazzled by orders from the Tailors’ Guild. Her grandfather’s excuse was that he’d already semi-retired and couldn’t give up on

his twice-daily strolls, while her brother dodged the responsibility by saying he had to take care of the Fano family workshop. It was clear why a favorite saying of Lucia's was "The men of Fano are spineless cowards."

As Lucia and Dahlia were the same age, it was obvious to Dahlia that the workers at the Magical Garment Factory must give Lucia a hard time. For whatever it was worth, though, Lucia had managed to optimize the manufacture of the socks and insoles in a mere two weeks and to turn a profit in about a month. It said a lot about the hard work and ability of the management team, which included Lucia, of course.

"Every time I stepped foot in the Tailors' Guild, I'd hear complete nonsense about how I was Mr. Fortunato's secret lover or how we were step-siblings or what have you! He and I are as different as, why, a kraken and an itty-bitty squid!"

"Setting your analogy aside, I'm truly sorry to hear about that..." Ivano's navy eyes were filled with empathy. Likely because he was himself a father to two daughters, it was especially disheartening to him to hear such nasty rumors about a single woman.

"Thank you. Every time, I'd laugh it off and do something like ask them to get their eyes checked out by a doctor or maybe a priest," Lucia explained. "How about you, Dahlia? Has it been rough since you founded your own company?"

"A bit, I suppose, though I try to let those comments slide."

"Too many people with too much time, I say! This is my job, and I'm not going to give it up before raking in the cash! Right now, I'm making what I made last year about every two months as chief of the factory, heh heh! If I keep at it for four whole years, I should be able to start my very own atelier." That was the type of person Lucia was; everything negative bounced off her, like light off her dazzling smile and sparkling azure eyes. It seemed like she was being paid very fairly too; something that should have been very appealing to her as she was working to save every bit of money she could.

However, Dahlia had her concerns too. "Make sure to put your health first and foremost, okay?"

"Don't you worry a bit, Dahlia. I'm not about to die before I clothe every

single person in the capital.” She beamed before patting Dahlia on her shoulder twice. Back when they were in elementary school, that was a good luck charm the schoolchildren did when they were nervous before a test. If Lucia felt compelled to comfort Dahlia, perhaps Dahlia looked more anxious than she had intended.

“Your outfit today is really cute too. It fits you perfectly,” Dahlia said. Lucia had on a slim-fitting dayflower-colored dress with a matching ribbon, over which she wore a matching coat—both of which flared just a bit at the tail end. Her hair was braided into a crown and accented with a ribbon in her signature shade of blue as well. All in all, her attire was cute and classy at the same time.

“Thanks! I checked in with Mr. Fortunato to make sure my outfit wouldn’t embarrass me or anyone else today. I’m still not sure if I have my manners nailed down, though,” she added. “I had a few of my fellow guild members who have regular business with the castle to coach me, but none of it makes much logical sense to me. I studied so hard, I swear I was getting nightmares about it.”

“Oh, I know what you mean. I started dreaming of my flash cards and of my teacher too...” It didn’t seem like Ivano had had it easy either.

As the three of them shared a laugh over their recent hardships, the carriage slowed down—they could surmise that they were pulling into the castle now. The passengers alighted and separated themselves by sex to have their identities confirmed and their belongings checked.

Dahlia had Lucia with her today, so she was sure that things would go much more smoothly. But truth be told, she dreaded a second encounter with the knights whom she had met during her last visit. Their previous conversation about athlete’s foot had not only made Dahlia raise her voice but had also brought down upon her the suspicion that she herself was afflicted with the infectious disease. Just thinking about it at all made her cringe, and she could only pray that no one would bring up the topic again and that she could leave without any shame.

After Dahlia and Lucia were quickly screened by a female knight, they were told that they would be received by a knight of the Order of Beast Hunters. By

the time the knight finished screening Ivano as well, a strapping blue-haired man was already standing there waiting.

“Good day. My name is Griswald Lanza, vice-captain of the Order of Beast Hunters, and I shall be escorting you,” he said with a smile. It was only then that Dahlia realized she was late on the draw, having been surprised that the vice-captain would personally come to collect them.

“I am Ivano Mercadante from the Rossetti Trading Company. I hope you can forgive me for my late introduction; my nervousness got the better of me, as it is my first time here at the castle.” Thankfully, he was quick to salvage the situation, and then the other two offered their salutations. Fortunately, when knights introduced themselves, only a single woman could offer her introduction after the subordinate party. If it weren’t for Oswald’s notes, Dahlia would be apologizing in a panic right now.

“Worry not, Mr. Mercadante. Our order is not very strict on formalities. Once you enter under our roof, feel free to speak more comfortably.”

“Thank you very much for being so considerate.”

Despite what Griswald had just said, Dahlia was unsure if she could take his words at face value as she didn’t know just how casual was *too* casual. She put on her business smile as the carriage started off once again.

“With your permission, I would like to take a detour to our duty room, though I apologize in advance as we won’t all be able to fit inside,” warned the vice-captain as he led the group through a hallway in the headquarters of the Order of Beast Hunters.

“We won’t fit inside...?” Dahlia muttered to herself.

“That’s correct. The Magical Garment Factory has graciously delivered an early batch of the socks, of which we distributed a pair to each member who wanted them. They turned out to be incredibly popular, with some people washing them at night just to put them on first thing in the morning, so our knights—along with Captain Grato—would love to get the chance to thank you in person for the socks along with the drying insoles.”

Dahlia looked to her side to find Lucia's azure eyes popping out of her head, then behind her to find Ivano with his business smile plastered on his face. She was genuinely happy to hear that her products had been so well-received. However, she couldn't help thinking about the whole athlete's foot brouhaha last time, hence her inclination to meet with as few people as possible and slip away without causing another ruckus. That desire was quickly dashed, however, as they were now in front of the duty room and all four doors were wide open.

"Here are Chairwoman Rossetti of the Rossetti Trading Company and Head Manager Fano of the Magical Garment Factory," announced Griswald as he entered the room. He had omitted Ivano's name, but as chairwoman of the company, Dahlia represented all her employees, attendants, bodyguards, and the like. If it weren't for Oswald's lessons, she would've been awfully anxious right about now.

"The Order welcomes you, Chairwoman Rossetti and Head Manager Fano. Thank you very much for coming here today," Grato greeted the guests as they walked in. Behind him, the room was packed with eight ranks of knights. Some wore dark gray uniforms with black vests, and others armor. What they all had in common were bright, cheerful smiles.

It was just a tad overwhelming for Dahlia, who looked around the room but couldn't pick Volf out of the crowd. "Thank you very much for inviting me today. My name is Dahlia Rossetti of the Rossetti Trading Company."

"And thank you for the warm welcome. My name is Lucia Fano, the head manager at the Magical Garment Factory." Both of them gently clasped their hands as they bowed.

"A pleasure to meet you, Head Manager Fano. I'm Grato Bartolone, captain of the Order of Beast Hunters. Thank you all so much for coming today."

"No, thank *you*. It is my honor to be invited to the castle today," Lucia replied with an effortless smile.

"I've gathered our members here today so we can personally express our gratitude. We've managed to cram the room full already, even though some of our number who are on duty are absent; I hope you can overlook just how crowded it is in here," he said as he walked in front of the knights. "Salute!"

At that one word, the knights placed their right hands against their left shoulders in unison. It was a little shocking for Dahlia to see just how perfectly they moved together. The knights' salute was for honoring only the most important dignitaries and high-ranking nobles (another topic that had appeared in the flash cards). Then, they shouted all at once, "Our sincerest gratitude!"

Dahlia could only keep her composure for so long, and that wall of sound was the last straw. Nobody in their party understood what the grand gesture was for.

"On behalf of everyone, thank you. Your socks and insoles have greatly improved the health and hygiene of our feet. As you can imagine, we sweat a lot during our training and expeditions, making regular socks rather unbearable. Now, though, we've even greatly reduced visits to the temple," said Grato.

The knights all nodded and murmured in agreement. Still, Dahlia couldn't and didn't want to figure out whether they were happy because of the improved sock situation, or because their athlete's foot had been cured.

The captain continued, "The rushed order must've made the manufacturing process quite an ordeal, and so we genuinely appreciate all that's been done. You've given us the power to wipe the floor with any monster we face this summer."

The knights roared in laughter, which made some of them seem even more threatening than before, though that might have been nothing more than Dahlia's imagination. She almost pitied the monsters that would stray too close to civilization this summer. Afterward, Captain Grato and the guests left the duty room as the other members of the order saw them off.

The group's next destination was the same drawing room Dahlia had seen on her previous visit. It was a large room with a well-polished black table in the center, around which the three members of Dahlia's party and five of the Order of Beast Hunters sat—none of which included Volf.

"We have here the same individuals who attended our previous meeting. Before the guildmasters join us, I would like to take this time to thank you, Chairwoman Rossetti," Grato said with a slight urgency as maids served cups of

black tea. “Our knights tended to wear their socks all day when out on expeditions, and that being the case, many of us were afflicted with athlete’s foot. However, with your tips from last time, the situation has improved dramatically.”

Having been embarrassed last time, she hesitated for a moment before she could acknowledge his thanks. “I’m very happy that I could be of some help.”

“I formatted all of your tips into a list and made copies for everyone in the order. All those confirmed to have or suspected of having the disease were sent to the temple to see the priests, then returned in new shoes. Their old shoes were first cleaned and then purified by magic. Oh, and we made changes to our bathing practices as well. Everyone now has their own set of towels, and we have adopted smaller bath mats that are laundered after every use. Though we have prioritized your socks and insoles for those who have previously struggled with the disease, we have yet to have a single person get reinfected,” Grato said with much delight.

Griswald, the two veteran knights, and Randolph nodded along with their captain’s sentiment. The four of them almost seemed as though they were chuckling to themselves, but Dahlia wondered if it was just her anxiety fooling her eyes. She managed to keep up her business smile the whole time, but her cheeks were almost cramping by now. They just couldn’t get away from the topic for whatever reason.

Grato continued, “I have also circulated the guide to the other orders, as it is of the utmost importance that they do not transmit it back to us.”

“I couldn’t agree more. We absolutely cannot have that,” said one of the knights. “They used to make light of us Beast Hunters for being unhygienic, but now we’ve silenced them.”

“Aye. They’d accuse us of contracting athlete’s foot from the monsters, but that was pulled out of thin air. Now, we don’t hear a single peep.”

The three of them might have looked satisfied, but there was something chilling in their tone. Dahlia knew better than to poke at their sore spot, though.

“Pfft. As if that could ever happen,” quipped Lucia, apparently thinking aloud. “Oh, m-my apologies! I didn’t mean to...”

“Fret not, Head Manager Fano. We appreciate that you could see through their ridiculous accusations,” Randolph said to reassure her.

Lucia seemed to scramble to find the right words. “Erm, my grandfather used to say that one contracted athlete’s foot by working so hard that one didn’t even have time to change out one’s socks. But then, I’d say one should have it cured and make sure it never recurs...”

“That’s a famous adage within both our circle and yours, I see.”

“There is certainly some truth to it. Perhaps we ought to cure the whole capital of the disease and prevent it from ever spreading again.”

The knights talking amongst themselves made things a little awkward for everyone else. Grato cleared his throat to move the conversation along. “Although I’m aware that your highest priority for the immediate future is furnishing our order with socks and insoles, I’d like to introduce your products to the other branches of the castle service as well—that is, if it wouldn’t make things too difficult on your end, of course. Please do let me know if that wouldn’t be possible for you or if they try to strong-arm our allotment for themselves; if that’s the case, we’ll deal with it on our end.”

“Thank you very much for being so considerate.” Though the Magical Garment Factory had readied itself for mass production, its output was nowhere near enough to immediately furnish the whole castle with their goods. If Grato was talking about a potential future arrangement, however, then it would be a very lucrative proposal.

“We thank you from the bottom of our hearts, and we absolutely mean it. The priests might even be sorry that our feet are so healthy now,” the captain said.

Although he’d clearly meant it as a joke, Ivano trembled at his words. Dahlia and her companions couldn’t be certain how much money the knights had been spending on this affliction, but it seemed that the Rossetti Trading Company must have cut off a sizable source of income for the priests. “Erm, Chairwoman Rossetti? I’ll crunch some numbers and see if we’re falling short, but shall we top up our donations to the temple?” he whispered.

That would be extremely prudent, she thought. “You go do that, Ivano...”

Dahlia went to the powder room, taking the chance not only to retouch her makeup but to calm herself down too. As she was returning to the drawing room, she happened upon Randolph.

“Miss Dahlia, please accept my thanks for your wonderful products.”

“Oh, Sir Randolph, I should be the one thanking you for your helpful advice last time.” She took half a step backward and bowed to him.

“I feared they were matters too trivial, though I am very impressed that you have mastered them in such a short amount of time.”

“Thank you very much for your kind words.”

He might have looked like a gruff and unrefined military man, but when his expression relaxed, he had a tender smile upon his face. Dahlia, who was on the taller side for a lady, still had to tilt her head skyward to speak to Randolph, as he stood more than two meters tall. When he looked down at her, his auburn eyes softened a touch. “Volf is currently out to meet the two guildmasters. Should be back momentarily, however. He had hoped to receive you personally, Miss Dahlia, but ‘You’re a part of the Rossetti Trading Company, so go entertain them!’ was our captain’s order to him.”

Dahlia hadn’t even thought of asking about Volf’s whereabouts, but Randolph must’ve suspected that she was at least a little curious. She would have understood if Volf had asked to receive her party as a whole, but she found it shocking that he had instead asked for her by name. She had lingering reservations, but it wasn’t as though she could directly ask Randolph about the matter, so she dropped it, and they returned to the meeting.

Before long, Volf appeared with Viscounts Jedda and Fortunato in tow—the masters of the Merchants’ Guild and the Tailors’ Guild, respectively. Volf was wearing his black uniform, while Jedda and Fortunato had on three-piece suits for the occasion. The handsome knight normally drew looks from everyone around him, but when Volf, Jedda—dignified with his hair and beard of pure white—and Fortunato—elegant with brilliantly blond hair and blue eyes—stood together, each of the three of them not only had presence but commanded attention in his own way. Though Dahlia did not risk a glance at Lucia, the chairwoman could sense her gulping.

“Chairwoman Rossetti, shall we begin with the delivery procedures?” recommended Ivano as everyone sat down at the table.

Dahlia gave the standard thank-you bit, which she’d memorized, to which Grato responded with a similarly set acknowledgment. These set phrases were what polite society demanded, and thus they complied. Then, Jedda and Fortunato quickly addressed each party at the table in turn, after which Dahlia and Lucia both signed three parchment documents.

That concluded the formalities for the first delivery. From this point on, the Magical Garment Factory and the Tailors’ Guild had official business with the castle, and the Rossetti Trading Company would receive royalties for the goods.

At last, the company had a steady revenue stream, which dispelled Dahlia’s worries about affording Ivano’s salary and those of future hires, and lessened other concerns as well. This was merely the beginning, however. At the very least, she was hoping to build up a three-year reserve fund as a buffer—something she’d learned from Ivano.

Just as she brought him to mind, he brought forth a white envelope trimmed in silver. “To commemorate our first transaction, the Rossetti Trading Company would like to present a gift of five of our shoe-dryers. Here is the documentation, sir.”

“‘Shoe-dryers,’ you called them?” Grato scrunched up his face slightly as he repeated the name. The toe socks and drying insoles had already solved his knights’ foot problems, so he might’ve been confused at Ivano presenting him with yet another new product.

“This device circulates warm—but not hot—air to rapidly dry any kind of shoe, from the leather boots you wear on your expeditions to everyday canvas shoes. It can also protect your footwear from damage and prevent it from developing an odor—perfect after cleaning or for rainy days.”

“Certainly, regular dryers would damage leather; I can see your device being very useful,” said Fortunato.

“I see. Thank you very much for the generous gift. It’ll work wonders for our combat boots after an expedition. I’m very excited to try it later.”

“The shoe-dryer will also be on the market starting tomorrow, so we hope you’ll keep us in mind.” Ivano marketed the new magical tool with a bright smile.

In response, Fortunato cocked his head to one side, then quickly glanced at Dahlia before smoothly turning his gaze onto Ivano. “Mercadante, would you have some time to speak? Preferably sooner rather than later.”

“Of course, Mr. Luini.”

Meanwhile, Jedda looked as stoic as ever, sitting there sipping his tea.

Dahlia looked over to Volf, and his eyes were subtly smiling as he listened intently to the conversation. He must’ve been happy to make yet another improvement to his order. After all, the shoe-dryer was something that the two of them had come up with together.

“With that, the formalities are out of the way, though we still have some time left. If anyone has pressing matters to discuss, please speak up.” Grato was met with silence, so he nodded in Volf’s direction, prompting him to leave his seat and the room. Grato continued, “I was introduced to quite an interesting piece of equipment that I’d like to share with everyone.”

As the captain piqued his audience’s curiosity, Ivano brought forth a set of documents. “Chairwoman, just in case.”

Dahlia took a quick glance—it was the specification document and blueprint for the camp stove. “Um, is...*Sir* Volf up to something?”

“I’m not certain, but we shall see. I apologize if this is presumptuous of me.”

While the two representatives of the company were still whispering to each other, Volf and a green-haired knight entered with camp stoves, silver cups, and cut-up strips of bacon in their hands. The two camp stoves looked absolutely minuscule on the monolithic table.

“I was told this ‘camp stove’ is a derivative of the compact magical stove,” said Grato.

Fortunato studied the magical tool earnestly. “It is *remarkably* small.”

Volf then placed the skillet on the element and turned the dial to start heating it up. “The stove comes with this skillet, which doubles as a lid for the pot here,” he explained as he added a piece of cut-up bacon to the warm pan.

Dahlia doubted that they should be doing this in the drawing room, but no one spoke up about it. It wasn’t exactly as if they were cooking a lavish feast, but the fancy rug and wallpaper were bound to pick up some of the smell.

“Chairwoman Rossetti, what is the output like?”

Jedda’s sudden question had her scrambling. “Um, about the same as the compact magical stove, sir.”

“Crystals?”

“It uses one small fire crystal.”

“Burn time?”

“Slightly shorter than the compact magical stove at about four to five hours, depending on weather conditions.”

“It shouldn’t prove to be a problem during expeditions as we have mages with fire magic who would be able to recharge the crystals,” Volf added.

Jedda’s black eyes narrowed as he nodded. “Hm. Should last long enough then.”

“This would be great to have in my office. I could have a hot cup of coffee whenever I wanted,” Fortunato chimed in. Dahlia thought that was a novel idea; she had never considered that use case until now.

“Do you brew your own coffee, Lord Fortunato?”

“Only very rarely. When I’m working late, it doesn’t quite sit right with me to ask for someone to make me coffee. The compact stove would be a little conspicuous, but the camp stove could easily be tucked away in some nook.”

“Would certainly be nice for mulled wine on cold nights as well,” the other guildmaster said.

Jedda’s words were reminiscent of his wife’s. When Dahlia had given Gabriella the gift of a compact magical stove, she had mentioned making hot wine—

something the couple had more than likely discussed between themselves too. She made a mental note to give Gabriella both a camp stove and a shoe-dryer for all the support in kind she'd received.

"Ready already, is it? That was rather quick," Grato said. Along with a plate of pan-fried bacon, everyone was also served a small silver cup. Judging by the scent rising from the cups, they seemed to be filled with white wine.

Was it appropriate to have alcohol with lunch at the castle? Grato certainly seemed to think so, but neither Oswald nor his flash cards had laid this out for Dahlia.

"It would be rude to everyone to call this water, so indulge me when I say this is some old grape juice I had tucked away." The captain had his goblet in hand and a sly smile on his face. Lucia looked surprised, and the others were awkwardly smiling in turn; Jedda, though, sat there expressionless as he was apt to do. "If this were wine," the captain continued, "I'd say, 'Thank you all for your presence and here's to a fortuitous future for everybody.' As it isn't, I shan't, but let's clink glasses with our neighbors just for the sentiment." They reached to their left and right to do so.

Dahlia sipped the straw-yellow wine and realized it was something to savor rather than to quickly gulp down. As splendid as the nose was, it was on the palate that the aromas blossomed. It was not nearly as dry as she had expected; rather, it was round and well balanced, with a hint of the barrel shining through. Though she knew little about wineries and brands, what Dahlia did know for certain was that this was an extraordinary bottle.

"Oh, my..." Lucia murmured, seemingly shocked by how delectable the wine was.

While Fortunato sat there still looking somewhat conflicted, Volf was savoring small sips and Jedda was unmistakably elated.

"Please, try the bacon as well," urged the knight with green hair.

The cured and smoked bacon was cut thick but chopped into three-centimeter pieces. Dahlia pierced a piece with a metal skewer, though she hesitated to eat it in one bite until seeing others do so. The still-warm bacon wasn't overly salty, but had just enough to bring out the natural sweetness of

the pork. It had been cooked long enough that the fat and some of the salt had been rendered out somewhat, perfect for serving with bread or, in this case, wine.

“If I may suggest, sir, it might not be a bad idea to replace some of the jerky in our rations with bacon.”

“We’ll see what the budget allows.”

“Would the scent of cooking attract monsters and animals?”

“We currently cook outdoors as it is and use either wind magic or deodorizers to combat the risk of attracting monsters, but it’s hard to say what our best option is until we field-test the stoves. In any case, we can take care of anything that comes our way,” Grato said coolly.

Despite his indifferent tone, Dahlia couldn’t help but worry that there must be monsters too strong or animals too big even for the knights to handle. Not to mention, it was almost a pitiful end for whatever creature might be lured into their camp by the scent of frying bacon.

“So, there we have it,” the captain continued. “Chairwoman Rossetti, please quote me for a hundred units of the camp stove.”

She thought she had already swallowed her sip of wine, but the way she almost spat it out demonstrated otherwise. Dahlia whipped her gaze over to Grato. “Th-Thank you very much for your interest. I shall give the order the best pricing—”

“No, please don’t hurt your bottom line; I’ll need to procure more in the future as well. A few of us with coin to spare will gladly cover whatever the order’s coffers can’t.”

“I believe some of us would even be willing to pay out of pocket for them,” Volf said matter-of-factly.

Surely that was a rash statement, she thought. The camp stove was by no means inexpensive. Members from commoner families or petty nobility didn’t have pockets that deep; neither would those with families to support.

“Is this another product of the Rossetti Trading Company? How marvelous.”

“That is very kind of you to say, Mr. Fortunato.” Beads of sweat formed on Dahlia’s brow. She almost wanted to apologize for taking up his time, as the camp stove had nothing to do with the Tailors’ Guild.

“These would be a boon for expeditions in the winter.”

“Definitely. We may even be able to avoid drinking coffee that’s been burnt to death over a campfire.”

After putting their lives on the line, the Beast Hunters had to sit in the freezing cold outside their tents for burnt coffee? It was beyond Dahlia how anyone could consider such a thing acceptable. In this kingdom—this world—it was paramount that humans keep monsters in check. The alternative was essentially to let the beasts raze towns and villages. That was no exaggeration; the phenomenon was well-documented throughout history. The Order of Beast Hunters—the brave warriors who did battle against this destructive force—deserved far better.

She recalled something Volf had once said. “Dahlia, what would you say to coming to the castle and showing everyone how to use one of these stoves?” he’d asked. She’d genuinely wanted little more than to improve the knights’ diet out in the field, and so she’d answered in the affirmative without giving the question much thought. At the time, coming to the castle had been beyond her wildest dreams, and so she had taken it as a statement made in jest. Now, though, through a chain of events, she was indeed within the castle walls. Perhaps it could all be ascribed to fate. What was certain was her desire to give back to the order—Volf included.

“Looks like we’re about to get busy, chairwoman,” said Ivano.

“It sure does, and I have the utmost gratitude for it.”

His dark blue eyes widened as he gazed at her, smiling. “That’s a very chairwoman-like response.”

“Magical toolmaker, actually.”

With the bouquet of jammy wine and the woodsmoke scent of bacon perfuming the drawing room, pleasant conversation resonated for the remainder of their scheduled time.



After boarding the carriage home, Dahlia was finally able to unclench and catch her breath. Lucia, who was sitting beside her, heaved a big sigh, evidently feeling the same. Her cheeks were tinged pink, perhaps an effect of the wine from earlier.

“How are you feeling, Lucia?” The seamstress really couldn’t handle her liquor; the barely half-full glass of wine might have already done her in.

“The way they stood... They were so cool...” Lucia sighed again, as if her friend hadn’t asked her a question just now.

Ivano, seated across from the two women, could but watch in silence.

“Ungh... I want to strip the three of them down and dress them up...”

“L-Lucia!” Dahlia felt she ought to count her blessings that they were at least in the carriage. If they had still been on castle grounds, she’d have had to gag her friend with a handkerchief.

“Sir Scalfarotto would look fine in colors that pop, but if it had to be black or white, then a ruffle shirt might work too. Oh, an overcoat wouldn’t be bad either,” Lucia mulled over aloud. “Mr. Jedda’s white hair is gorgeous, so maybe he’d do well in light colors. Oh, but what about bold patterns? As for Mr. Fortunato, he’s always in suits. A knight’s uniform or riding outfit would be good. Or perhaps something more royal?” Her eyes of dayflower blue were pointed into the distance, as if she were staring at something only she could see. It would be some time before her tunnel vision dissipated.

Dahlia knew how it was, as she often suffered the same myopia when it came to magical tools. She took out some unbleached paper and a pencil. “Here, Lucia. Just remember not to draw their faces, all right? We don’t want to be disrespectful.”

“Of course! Thank you, Dahlia!” She began immediately sketching the three men modeling her inspiration. It was distinctively Lucia’s work, different from the current trend in the capital for ornate menswear.

“Ms. Dahlia, is Ms. Lucia interested in fashion design?”

“You could say that. In fact, she’s rather quite skilled. Her wardrobe is all of

her own design.”

“My, that’s incredible...” Ivano said as he looked upon her.

Whether she didn’t notice or she didn’t care that the other two were whispering about her, Lucia continued sketching a figure that resembled Volf wearing a long coat with an unrealistically flared seat. If only Dahlia had had the foresight to bring a set of pencil crayons with her as well.

Ivano continued, “Ms. Lucia, what think you of Sir Volfred and Mr. Luini?”

She was fully absorbed in drawing and didn’t bother looking up to respond. “Sir Scalfarotto’s height works to show off his clothes. Mr. Fortunato isn’t short by any means, but since his hair has grown out a bit, changing hairstyles could enable him to fit a wider variety of styles. Oh! Fancy metals or fur would look great on either of them!”

“How about in terms of romance? Do you have any interest in them that way?”

“Nope. Could you imagine the headache that is manners when dating a noble? Plus, I don’t think we’d have anything in common to talk about other than work. Maybe if they silently stood there smiling as I dressed them up, but I couldn’t care less about how handsome they look,” she declared without any wavering.

“How surprising to find someone who *isn’t* affected by Sir Volf’s charm.”

“Ivano, what are you trying to get at...?”

“Oh, no, I was just thinking that someone like her would be great for the company. It would really cut down on any misunderstandings, you see.”

He certainly made a strong point. It would complicate things if an employee were to be so easily swayed by Volf or Fortunato’s looks, but Dahlia couldn’t decide whether that was a high or low bar to clear.

“Ms. Lucia, forgive me for being so frank. Do you currently have a significant other?”

“Nope. Dating might be fun, though.”

“What kind of person would you be interested in?”

“Well, definitely girls, so I could have them try on cute clothes. Oh, but if it were a boy on the slender side, that might work too. He could try on both men’s and women’s clothing for me.”

Ivano was at a loss for words, so Dahlia explained it to him. “Lucia’s in love with fabric, lace, and ribbon—or so her older brother said.”

“You know, that makes a great deal of sense.”

“When she and I go out together, I feel as if I’m a doll.”

“But of course! Dahlia, you’re tall and you’ve got great proportions. And now that you’ve finally learned how to dress and even do makeup, you’ve gotta give me a whole day next time.” Lucia noted in full detail the materials required for the clothes in her sketch.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Come oooooon! I’ll even go with you to look at magical tools in the morning, then after lunch, we’ll go check out clothes.”

“That’s hardly an even split of our time.”

“I mean, how many tool shops are there even? And they’re always tiny inside, so it’s not as if there’s *that* much to see anyway.”

“It’s not about the number of stores or even the size of them. It takes a lot of time to examine every tool, you know?”

“Well, for clothes, you have lingerie, shoes, accessories—you name it. That’s gotta take up more time.”

“Well, for magical tools, there are domestic ones, portable ones, and ones for combat. And two tools that do the same thing might have different inner workings, so they take time to look at too.”

Ivano looked on in amusement but also in slight surprise at how worked up Dahlia had gotten.

“Fine, then let’s take turns,” Lucia said. “We’ll shop for magical tools first, then when we’re both off next time, we’ll shop for clothes. Come over to my place in the morning and I’ll dress you up and do your face too. Then we’ll go out in the afternoon. How’s that sound?”

“Lucia, you’re planning to take up the whole morning for that?”

“Well, duh. I’ll have you try on outfits until I’m satisfied!”

Ivano leaned back in his seat, smiling to himself. Their argument—if one could call it that—continued, but he couldn’t make up his mind whether to call it a conversation between young ladies or one between a magical toolmaker and a seamstress. “Birds of a feather, eh?”



The evening after, the members of the Merchants’ Guild went out for dinner together—namely Vice-Guildmaster of the Merchants’ Guild, Gabriella, and scrivener Dominic, along with Dahlia, Volf, and Ivano. Their last meeting had had them racking their brains, planning for the toe socks and insoles. A great deal had happened between then and yesterday, when they’d finally made their first delivery.

Gabriella had picked out a restaurant in the center of the city, and there the five of them sat around a circular table in a private room. Their entrée for the night was red bear steak—the very same thing they’d had at the guildhall last time. There was a particular gaminess to it that went well with the off-dry white wine, stout, and dry estervino that filled the glasses they clinked thrice—though the more they had, the less they were sure which paired best.

“What a hectic month we’ve had,” Ivano said merrily with a dark glass of beer in one hand. He looked to be the one feeling the effects of the alcohol the most.

“Twenty days from founding your own company to trading with the castle? That has to be a new record,” his former boss remarked.

Dahlia had to correct Gabriella. “That was just when I received the invitation from the order. It took one month after that for the business side of things to go through.”

“Even so, that’s no small feat, you know? From what I can recall, the only company that made inroads faster was the Zola Company.”

“How impressive of Mr. Oswald,” she responded.

“That he is. It didn’t take much time for the man to get his barony either. With the castle’s sizable procurement of his chilling fans this year, he’ll be made

a viscount in no time.”

“Then Mr. Oswald would become ‘Viscount of Chilling Fans,’” Ivano said.

That had Dahlia thinking. When she’d seen the chilling fan at the Goddess’s Right Eye, she couldn’t help but see an air conditioner. A single unit couldn’t be quick or easy to produce, let alone a large shipment for the castle. If he was as busy as she thought he’d be, Dahlia worried that her lessons would make things too difficult for him.

Ivano continued, “Shouldn’t that mean Ms. Dahlia would also soon receive an endorsement for nobility?”

“That might very well happen, in which case I hope her barony would have a snazzy title to go with it,” replied Dominic. Dahlia could hardly think of snazzy magical tools, let alone snazzy titles for herself.

Gabriella looked a little sorry as she swirled her glass of wine. “Neither ‘Baroness of Socks’ nor ‘Baroness of Insoles’ has a good ring, I hate to say.” They were equally terrible, but nothing could be worse than “Baroness of Athlete’s Foot.” Since she was developing magical swords, she’d briefly considered taking a title along those lines before striking that option off the list after she remembered the names of the Blade of the Dark Lord’s Minion and the Creeping Blade.

“Well, with the toe socks, drying insoles, and camp stove...what about ‘Baroness of Expeditions’?”

“If I may object, Sir Volf, that sounds as though Ms. Dahlia were part of the expeditions,” explained Ivano.

“Oh, you’re right; that is definitely no good.” With a cup of estervino in hand, Volf shook his head. For Dahlia to join one of his expeditions would be unimaginable. The only thing she’d accomplish would be to get in everyone’s way. While she’d be lying if she said she didn’t want to see a living monster up close, the only logical outcome of that situation would be that she’d immediately become the monster’s predinner snack.

“I know I’m terribly late in saying this, Volf, but thank you for introducing the camp stove to Captain Grato,” she said. Taking advantage of the break in their

conversation, Dahlia bowed to the knight sitting beside her. She would've thanked him yesterday if she'd had the time to do so; thankfully, he'd been able to join the meal tonight at the last minute. She blamed the constant drinks and the subsequent toasting for her forgetfulness.

"You have my thanks as well. I'm extremely grateful to have you promote our products," added Ivano. "I was at a loss for words when I heard the captain's request for such a large quote."

"No need to thank me. All I did was go to Captain Grato's office, say, 'This is a camp stove,' and fry up some bacon."

"I say, that's quite the innovative sales tactic, Sir Volfred," Dominic said.

"I just thought it would be quicker to show him than to explain everything."

Dahlia couldn't disagree that his demonstration had been innovative, but she did silently question whether the captain's office had been the best place to carry it out. The other question she had was where she could buy some of that bacon for herself.

"Well, it must have worked, since he asked for a quote on a hundred units," said Dominic.

"I showed him how to use the stove and told him roughly how much they would cost, but I didn't say a word to urge him to purchase them. The captain did ask me about the inventor, though."

That he'd asked about Dahlia gave her a bit of a startle. Though her father had been an honorary baron, she herself was merely a commoner, a novice toolmaker, and the founder of a brand-new trading company. Her name had little cachet even with Jedda and Volf as her guarantors already. Taking all that into account, why would Grato ask for a quote on the spot?

Volf continued, "He asked who'd made it and why, and so I told him it was Dahlia Rossetti and that she wished to help improve our diet on our missions. Oh, should I have negotiated or asked him to sign a standing order?"

"Oh, no, you did more than anyone could ask for. I forgot that you are a natural-born salesman..." Ivano said with a sigh.

Dominic, who was sitting beside him, laughed aloud. “I am sure your captain was more than happy at the prospect of improving the meals on your journeys.”

“He wasn’t just happy; he took the camp stove home that night, and the very next day, he talked to me about adopting it. I’m sure everyone else sees it as well. I thought that the visit yesterday would make for a great chance.”

Dahlia was glad that Grato had found the stove beneficial, but she worried about the pricing. She thought she ought to give him a bulk discount, but rather than worrying alone, she wanted to discuss the matter with Ivano.

“Wait. Did you just say a hundred units?” Gabriella squinted as though she questioned her hearing, even though she’d seen the camp stove before as well.

“That’s correct. Here I had been expecting the captain to ask for a dozen units or so for field trials first,” said Ivano.

“And you presented him with shoe-dryers too?”

“Yes, five of them. They can be built in workshops already producing conventional dryers, so we should easily be able to put together an order of one or two hundred units.”

“Oh, that’s right. Captain Grato mentioned today that he’ll be procuring the shoe-dryer sooner or later as well. I’ll get back with the exact numbers when I have them, so I ask that we get the camp stove quote squared away first.”

“Thank you very much, Sir Volf,” Ivano said. “More good news to be thankful for, Chairwoman.”

“R-Right. Thank you, Volf.” Just like that, it seemed that there was going to be more business. Fortunately, the shoe-dryer was simple to manufacture, as long as they could find workshops already producing dryers. Dahlia had entrusted everything related to the shoe-dryer to Ivano, and the coordination and production planning between the factories had gone even more smoothly than she had expected.

However, the question of how to assemble the order of potentially more than a hundred camp stoves was a bit of a head-scratcher. She didn’t know which factory to ask and how much to ask of them. She also needed to ensure the

final product was safe.

There was much to consider and to ask for counsel about; it all piled up and weighed on her. And, much like last time, she was hardly in the frame of mind to savor her red bear.

The night sky was dotted with stars by the time they finished their meal. At the nearby carriage stop were equal measures of people returning home and people advancing to their next watering hole.

A coach waxed to a deep, gleaming black had been there waiting on Gabriella as the rest of the party said their farewells. After they saw her off, Ivano put on his coat. “Sir Volf, I hope to delegate to you the task of sending Ms. Dahlia home.”

“Of course, but isn’t your home on the way? Why not ride with us?”

“Oh, I have plans afterward.”

“I certainly hope you’re not planning on going back to the guild to work.” One could almost hear Dahlia glaring in her tone.

“No, nothing of the sort! I know that as our chairwoman, you’re vehemently opposed to the idea of overtime. Don’t worry. I’m meeting up with an acquaintance for a drink.” Ivano chuckled as he waved with his right hand. The flush on his face had dissipated; he had sobered up already.

“Do you want a ride to your next stop, then?” asked the knight.

“No, no, it’s not on the way, but I appreciate the thought.”

“I hope you’ll enjoy a good drink, then.”

“And hopefully I don’t get myself in trouble either!” Ivano bowed slightly to the others before walking off in the opposite direction.

“How about you, Dominic? My family’s coach is here and there’s a seat for you if you’d like.”

“Thank you for the offer, Volfred, but only if I won’t be getting in the way of you two.”

“Of course not.”

“Not at all.” The two of them answered him at the same time, and they all shared a laugh as they boarded the coach.

The Scalfarotto family coach looked very ordinary at first glance, with both its exterior and interior in an unassuming black. That expectation was quickly subverted when the passengers sat down; the quality showed in the perfect firmness of the seat cushions, the bolstering of the seat backs, and the fine low-pile carpeting that lined the floor. Dahlia sat in great comfort and appreciated the smooth ride, which did little to make her motion sick.

“It seems like you’ll be rather busy for the foreseeable future, Ms. Dahlia,” commented Dominic. His expression was warm and gentle as always.

She nodded, and she recalled a recent memory—the last time they’d ridden together in a carriage had been on *that* day. “Dominic, thank you. Thank you for everything. Ever since...Tobias and I called off our engagement, not only have you taken such good care of me, you’ve handled all the paperwork as well—both of which came out of the blue, I know.”

“Ms. Dahlia, you needn’t place undue worry on yourself; there is nothing for you to apologize for. In the business world, there are always unanticipated turns of events.” That day, Dominic had shown no signs of ill humor. He’d calmly listened to all that Dahlia had to say, written up all the necessary documents, and given her all the support that she’d dearly needed. He’d even returned to the Merchants’ Guild the key to what was supposed to be her new home. Only looking back on that day was Dahlia able to see through the blur of activity and realize that she had so much for which to thank Dominic.

“Thank you for your advice as well. It was fortunate that the scrivener I had was you, Dominic.” The day after he’d received the fairy glass spectacles, Volf had brought Dahlia a document drawn up by the scrivener, reading, “Dahlia Rossetti will be recognized as a friend of equal status and permitted to speak freely without fear of censure.” It was also Dominic who had recommended that Volf invest in her company.

“Thank you both as well. I’m very happy that you would have me as your scrivener,” Dominic said. “It certainly didn’t take long before the Rossetti

Trading Company started trading with the castle.”

“It’s all thanks to Volf’s promotion—and everyone else’s help. Now, if I were on my own...”

“All I did was show your products to my captain. You did all the hard work.”

Dominic clasped his hands together as he listened on with a smile. “To return to an earlier topic, have you two thought about becoming baron and baroness soon?”

“Me? Baroness?”

“If you keep coming up with your wonderful inventions, it wouldn’t take more than a few years. For Volfred, ten years of service in the Scarlet Armors or a particularly impressive deed would be endorsement enough. Have you successfully felled a particularly dangerous monster before?”

“I’ve taken down a cyclops before, but that was hardly an individual effort, so I’m not sure if it counts for much...” Volf hesitated to say for certain as he searched his memories. As people who did battle with literal giants, the Scarlet Armors probably deserved more than a mere barony for ten years of service.

“Even without ten years of service, I believe you stand a strong chance with a recommendation. It would be worthwhile for you two to go for the rank. It will open many more opportunities to you.”

“I’ll...think about it.” Dahlia couldn’t get past the knowledge that becoming baroness would put her at the same rank as Carlo and Oswald—people who were, in actual fact, infinitely further ahead of her in society. But it was true that it would open up many more opportunities for her, not just as a magical toolmaker, but also with respect to her friendship with Volf. As someone who was so inexperienced, she couldn’t possibly let these prime opportunities slip by her, even if that was just her own greed speaking.

“It seems that my prayers that day came true, Ms. Dahlia.” When he’d alighted from the carriage last time, he’d prayed for her future happiness.

That day had truly been a turning point for her, and she recognized the many different blessings that had helped her get where she was now. “Yes, they surely did,” she said, smiling as she recalled the recent past.

Dominic smiled that same warm and gentle smile he always had. He looked forward, not just at her but at Volf sitting beside her, and said, “I offer the same wish again—I pray the future brings you naught but happiness.”

Interlude: The Master of the Tailors' Guild & the Noble Way

"I'm terribly sorry to have kept you waiting, Mr. Luini."

"Worry not; I haven't been waiting long. Besides, I'm hardly being reasonable asking you to come here like this."

Stopped a distance away from the carriage station, there was yet another black-painted coach. This one had Fortunato of the Tailors' Guild waiting inside. He was dressed in a darker shade of blue—almost ultramarine—that accentuated his baby blond locks. Once Ivano sat down, the vehicle set off.

"Mercadante, I ought to thank you for the shoe-dryer. After receiving it this morning, I tried it out right away and it worked phenomenally."

"I am very happy to hear that you enjoyed it."

"I would've given all of my time had you come to me to mass-produce them." Though Fortunato was all smiles, his icy tone made it apparent that his smile was the polite business kind.

"I apologize for the short notice. I was not sure whether it would be my place as a mere employee to do so, but I shall take your offer and come to you for advice regarding any future dealings with the Tailors' Guild."

"I look forward to it. Speaking of which, has your company decided on the next product already?"

"We are in the midst of discussing several proposals."

Fortunato's glare alone was almost sharp enough to cut through the thick summer air, yet his blue eyes were trying to dig deeper. "Have you thought about registering the Rossetti Trading Company with the Tailors' Guild as well? You'll find us very accommodating."

"Thank you kindly for the offer, but we're still a very small organization."

“What was it? Two employees and two clerks? Your work must be quite demanding.” He was right on the money, but that wasn’t so impressive; as the company rented a room within the Merchants’ Guild to use as their office, it was information easily accessible with a simple inquiry. Ivano took it as a sign of just how interested the man was in their business. “Perhaps I could refer you to some people. I can personally guarantee as many as you need and have them sign contracts at the temple too, if you’d like.”

Ivano needed a moment to process all of that. There weren’t many people who had personal guarantors and were bound to their honor by magical contracts, making this quite the appealing proposition if not for all the obvious strings attached. “I am very grateful that you would offer to do so for us, but as our company has yet to pass the two-month mark, we still have teething troubles to resolve first. I’m sure we shall need your help in the future, so thank you in advance.”

Ivano continued to evade Fortunato’s blandishments, and the coach came to a halt, allowing Ivano to catch his breath. He stepped outside and found himself at an intersection somewhere in the nobles’ quarter. The restaurant in front of them was rather small for the neighborhood but rather large compared to what a commoner like himself was accustomed to.

Ivano and Fortunato scaled the stairs to the second floor. Standing in the back corner were a knight and a waiter, marking their room. On a table inside sat an anti-eavesdropper, totally undisguised, as though it were as commonplace as a table-side cruet set, which reminded Ivano he was just a touch out of place amongst nobles such as his host.

“Since you’ve already eaten, I think we ought to try some unusual wines tonight,” Fortunato said, indicating the charcuterie platter in front of him. “The white here is the youngest bottle they have. This red here is more mature and is infused with medicinal herbs. I recommend starting with the young white.”

After clinking glasses with him, Ivano took a sip. The white wine was fresh and grapey, quite the unfamiliar flavor. Its initial juice-like sweetness was soon overpowered by a hot, harsh bite of ethanol. The sharpness was different but not to say unenjoyable, though it was obvious why the bottle was deemed

young.

“It’ll be much better after ten years, I’d say.” Fortunato looked less than pleased; he furrowed his brow. “The three of us should go out for lunch sometime—you, me, and Chairwoman Rossetti.”

“I would love to. My only concern is with our schedules.”

“In that case, let’s do just you and me, then. I want to hear all about your new products.”

“Thank you for the invitation, though I can’t help but think that our products have less to do with the Tailors’ than with the Merchants’ Guild. Our most recent product, the shoe-dryer, was derived from everyday dryers. I fear that our products wouldn’t be very profitable for you, Mr. Luini.”

If Fortunato could see the direction their company was headed, then he could get his finger in the production and trading pie. The only trouble was that the Rossetti Company was not a member of the Tailors’ Guild, meaning that they owed Fortunato absolutely nothing. And if the company wasn’t to go through his guild for mass production, then there was little that he could do to help. In short—why would the Rossetti Trading Company cooperate or compromise with Fortunato if there was nothing to gain from him?

“I know I’m dredging up the past, but when the waterproof cloth first debuted, everyone came after the Tailors’ Guild asking why we weren’t involved. They threw us a bone with the raincoats, but even so, you know? It was quite vexing for the guildmaster at the time.”

As much as that was simply Fortunato moaning to himself, Ivano did empathize. The current guildmaster had a point; the waterproof *cloth* should have had everything to do with the Tailors’ Guild—it was in the name—but Dahlia’s invention had been registered and sold through the Merchants’ Guild. However, that was because the previous chairman of Orlando & Co. had taken control of its production and marketing to make things easier for the Rossettis. Nevertheless, doing so had apparently impacted the Tailors’ Guild to quite an extent, although this was news to Ivano.

“Anyway,” Fortunato continued, “it would be terribly rude of me to come empty-handed to ask the ever-busy Mercadante on a lunch date. Rather than

offering you a bouquet of flowers, I'll offer my services soliciting footwear-related businesses registered with my guild to see what they can do about your shoe-dryer. And of course, those letters would be sent in my name."

"It would be very generous of you to spread the news to your largest clients as well."

"That wouldn't be generous; it would be the least I could do."

"In that case, I will do my best to fit into your busy schedule." Ivano's smile belied the sweat dripping down his back. Fortunato's offer was simply too good to be true.

Fortunato cracked on with the second bottle of wine and filled both their glasses. "I've been meaning to ask. Last I remember, you were still with the Merchants' Guild. Since when do you work for Ms. Dahlia?"

"Only since the meeting about the drying insoles. I asked the chairwoman if I might join the company."

"That speaks volumes about your good judgment of character and your willingness to take the initiative." He raised his glass to touch Ivano's.

The red wine had a beautiful bouquet and was clearly well-aged, judging by the perfect balance of sweetness and acidity. There was much complexity to discover, and yet it was immensely drinkable. The slightly bitter finish was herbaceous rather than vegetal.

"Mercadante, if you ever leave the Rossetti Trading Company, you let me know right away before you decide on anything else. I'll do whatever I can to cater to you." His sudden bluntness stopped the gears inside Ivano's head from turning for a moment.

"You flatter me, sir. But that would only happen if either our company collapses or I do."

"Is that right? Well, if you ever change your tune or run into trouble, you know where to find me."

"Thank you very much. Our company may be still inconsequential and insignificant, but we hope we can consult you for help in the future, Mr. Luini."

“Of course. And call me Forto—please tell Chairwoman Rossetti to do the same. The garment trade has brought us closer, after all.”

“That’s very kind of you. Call me Ivano as well, if you please.”

Ivano had done some digging before coming here tonight. He’d been shocked to learn that he was about the same age as the man currently sitting across from him. However, Fortunato looked younger than Ivano—and yet he spoke as though Ivano were the younger man. Fortunato was objectively attractive and it was immediately noticeable—he was not unlike Volf in that respect—but despite his flamboyance, there was a veil that shrouded him. To put it curtly, his attractive exterior must have been concealing something.

“Once your company gains renown, I’m sure there will be many flies buzzing around Miss Dahlia. Though I’m not sure if I should have said that to you, now that I think about it.”

“For what it’s worth, I wholeheartedly agree. If it were Ms. Lucia, she could easily swat down any fly with her words alone.”

“How true. It’ll be interesting to see if Miss Dahlia pays heed to the buzzing or if she punishes the flies.”

Ivano took another sip of his wine, and just like that, his second glass had disappeared. “In any case, I hadn’t expected you would be so invested in our company.”

“It’s merely that I can see how useful the Rossetti Trading Company is and will be. If it weren’t for Sir Volfred by her side, I might even entertain the idea of taking Miss Dahlia as my second wife.”

There was something about Fortunato’s jesting words that sounded all too serious. *Take her as a wife because she’s useful?* Ivano wondered if that was simply how nobles thought, but it did not sit right with him at all. The once-smooth wine now left a terribly acrid taste in his mouth. “We certainly do have strong support from our guarantors. Sir Volf and Viscountess Jedda both take very good care of our chairwoman.”

“That’s quite the impenetrable defense you have erected. Still, Miss Dahlia’s brilliance seems to have shone forth rather suddenly, considering her lackluster

past. Prior to her waterproof cloth, she hadn't produced anything of note, had she?"

"...That was because Ms. Dahlia's father, Carlo, was protective of her."

"Was Miss Dahlia *really* the inventor of the waterproof cloth?"

"...Yes. It was something she came up with entirely on her own. She has been with the guild since she was a student... She even personally undertook to gather all the materials for it."

"What about the socks and insoles? Are those Miss Dahlia's inventions as well?"

"...Yes, of course."

"So her father passed away, her damfool of a fiancé left her, and now Sir Volfred has picked her up? Was it Madam Jedda who introduced them to each other? Or was that you?"

"...It was neither of us."

Hold on. What in the hell am I saying? Why the hell am I blabbering like this? Ivano came to his senses and realized he wasn't in control of himself, and he bit his lower lip with all his might. The jolt of pain was enough to prevent him from speaking further as he stained his handkerchief with his blood. Fortunato extended him a bottle of potion, which Ivano didn't hesitate to take. The wound on his lower lip was instantly erased.

"Forgive me. I suppose the effects of the wine were stronger than I had intended. It's to relax the lips, you see? Since this is our first time discussing business, I thought it would help us speak freely with one another. And, of course, I'm having the same wine myself," Fortunato said, pointing to his own empty glass.

Ivano was in high dudgeon—not only because he'd been drugged, but because he'd fallen for someone's tricks so blindly. If this was the noble way, then he wanted nothing to do with it.

"Here—by way of apology, this is something for you," Fortunato said.

"A ring?"

“For your personal protection. It prevents poisons, confusion, and even aphrodisiacs from affecting you. These are indispensable when you have business with nobles—from now on, you’ll need to be careful around food, drinks, and even women who approach you. Perhaps Madam Jedda isn’t as well-versed in matters like this?”

Ivano knew at once that behind Fortunato’s polite facade, he was insinuating that Ivano’s former master had failed him. The Merchants’ Guild dealt mostly with merchants, naturally, but now that Ivano was with the Rossetti Company, he knew he would be dealing more with the aristocracy. There was much he didn’t know and much he needed to learn.

“Thank you for the gift,” Ivano said. He slipped the ring onto the middle finger of his right hand and then took a deep breath. He didn’t have much magic, but the ring didn’t require much. It cleared his head of the fuzziness from earlier, although it could not wash away the lingering hint of blood in his mouth.

“I hope you’ll join me for drinks another time. I’d like to think I know a thing or two about dealing with the nobility, besides which I know a few noblewomen. So, if you have any new products soon to debut, let me know right away and I’ll be able to help you out.” Again, his words were very kind on the surface, but the truth was that he was more or less strong-arming Ivano. Fortunato was telling Ivano that he didn’t understand the people he would be dealing with, and that he’d find himself in trouble if he fell for another trick of this kind. Fortunato would teach him all about the noble way in exchange for some insider information. Fortunato was irritating but undeniably effective; he would have made for a good teacher.

As the saying goes: if you can’t beat them, join them. “Very well. I shall consult our chairwoman about it,” Ivano replied.

“I’m looking forward to our next outing, then.” Fortunato’s smile was absolutely aggravating.

“Mr. Forto, I have brought a present for you as well. It’s from our chairwoman.” With a straight face, Ivano passed him a white envelope—with permission from Dahlia, of course.

After visiting the castle for the first time, Dahlia had returned to the guild

haggard and almost in tears. Ivano and Gabriella had worried that something had gone terribly wrong, only for Dahlia to recount the athlete's foot ordeal. Despite the woes that she had gone through, Ivano had used her knowledge to defeat the problem that had plagued him for five years. He had compiled her notes into cards and placed them in said white envelope.

"These—I..." Fortunato stumbled over his words trying to get his thoughts out. The smile on his face had been natural and effortless, but now it appeared markedly forced; it hadn't taken very long for his control to falter. "Not that I would know, but these tips ought to be extremely helpful to those afflicted."

"Oh, they will be. It might be good information to know even if it does not pertain to you. You could help your lady friends in the aristocracy." Athlete's foot affected women just as much as men. It was doubly as bad if it circulated within a family; there had been cases in which one sufferer infected a spouse and thereby created a terrible rift between the parties.

"It's quite the sensitive topic, don't you think?"

"It is. It requires a delicate touch to broach the problem with a significant other, so discretion would be ideal. If you fear revealing your own problems, you could always use the pretext that you learned it all from a friend. Imagine a lover who cared for you so much that she would do this much research to aid you. Any man would be happy, would he not? With this information, I'm sure you can buy a few favors."

Fortunato paused for a beat. "I'm not saying this to flatter you, Ivano, but you are an incredibly talented man."

"Thank you for the kind words."

"Just one problem, though. If you're going to take that route, you should've left Miss Dahlia's name out of it. What if I thought you were implying that *she* was the lover who cared for me so much?"

Ivano had been trying to needle Fortunato, but now Fortunato had turned the tables on him. "Forgive me; I misspoke. The chairwoman gave me permission to bring this to you."

Fortunato chuckled at the way Ivano had thrown in the towel. "Nobles have a

language all their own. They love to catch you when you slip up. I'd say you had best warn Miss Dahlia as well, but I'm sure Sir Volfred has already helped her out."

"Had our chairwoman said something to cause offense?"

"When we first met, she said, 'You have my trust, Mr. Forto. I leave everything to you.' That was quite something." It almost sounded as if he were pining for his lady love.

Ivano tilted his head quizzically. "That was when we were discussing the toe socks, correct?"

"Quite right. But you see, when an unmarried noblewoman says such a thing to a knight, it means that she wants him to be *her* knight—a very strong declaration of love. I can guarantee you that it's a line any knight would like to hear once. As a man who left knighthood behind, I'd thought I would never see that dream fulfilled."

"I apologize on our chairwoman's behalf. I am sure she made the remark unwittingly." It had to be a coincidence. The nobility had too many roundabout sayings, and this was apparently one of them. Ivano considered whether he should speak to Dahlia about this matter, but then he recalled how hard she'd tried to memorize her flash cards. How could he possibly tell her to step her efforts up when she was already giving it her all?

"Don't worry; I understand full well. Oh, there's more, by the way. Some time ago, there was a popular opera in which the woman said that line to the man on their first night together. In fact, that was how the opera became so famous. For better or for worse, anyone would know the connotations of the line if she were familiar with the opera."

"I'm not quite sure what to say exactly, but...nobles sure can be a pain in the neck," Ivano said with a weary chuckle.

Fortunato's laughter was much less restrained than Ivano's; indeed, he guffawed. "You took the words right out of my mouth. The socializing, bywords, manners—there are just so many rules to trip you up. But it's simply unavoidable for me. Three-quarters of the Guild's profits come from these aristocrats, so it's worth the trouble."

“I suppose it must be.”

“There is just so much more money to be had, and that’s what you need to grow your company too.”

It might not be such a bad idea to maintain a relationship with Fortunato after all. Just as Dahlia had Oswald as a mentor in magical toolmaking, Ivano needed Fortunato as his mentor in the intricacies of the nobles’ world. His personal feelings about the man were secondary to what he would gain from him.

“How about I take you somewhere with a *better view* after this? My treat, of course,” Fortunato suggested.

“Thank you for the invitation, but I have three lovely ladies at home already.”

“That I didn’t know. You’re truly a man of many talents, Ivano.”

“Yes, a wife and two daughters can really keep a man busy.”

Fortunato looked almost confused by his response. Ivano wondered whether Fortunato was as unfamiliar with the ways of commoners as Ivano himself was with the ways of the nobility.

“Do you intend to take a second wife, Mr. Forto?”

“My wife often urges me to do so. More hands around the house, she says. And what of you, Ivano? Once your company expands, perhaps it might be beneficial.”

“My beloved three are enough for me. Having a second wife just sounds like twice the trouble anyway...”

“You have a point there. One is trouble enough...” Perhaps the herbed wine was making Fortunato spill his true thoughts, but for once, the two of them agreed on something. “Let’s put a stop to all the shop talk. What say I order us some wine made from nothing but grapes? Then you can tell me more about your wife and daughters.”

“Likewise, Mr. Forto, I would love to hear more about your missus.”

Fortunato stepped out of the room, presumably to find waitstaff to bring the next round of drinks. When he returned, he sat back down with a roguish smirk on his face. Soon the waiter came with their order, and Fortunato said, “This

bottle says all there is to be said about my wife.”

Ivano burst out laughing when he read the gold label on the bottle: O Ephemeral Goddess That Hath Stolen Mine Heart, 'Tis You, My Dearest Wife.

Pasta Noodle Soup to Round Off the Night

“You didn’t eat too much tonight, did you, Volf?” Dahlia asked as they rode in the carriage back to her home. During dinner, they’d debated whether the white wine, the stout, or the dry estervino paired best with the red bear steak.

“Well, I came straight from training, but I had my fill of meat and drinks.” His response hardly answered her question. He could normally eat enough food for three people, but on this occasion, he hadn’t even ordered seconds.

“Was training tough today?”

“No, not especially so, but I took a shield right to the solar plexus. I’m fine now, though, in case you were worrying.”

“Oh. They weren’t, like, picking on you again, were they?”

“No, it’s not like that. I just got smacked by Randolph’s shield,” he said. Dahlia was under the impression that the knights sparred with each other, but her uncertainty must have shown because Volf apparently felt compelled to explain further. “We were practicing last-minute dodges, with Randolph playing the role of the monster. The man’s built like one, moves like one, and the way he flips his shield up is just like the way a giant boar swings its tusks. Anyway, I was trying to counter him but instead ate his shield.”

“That sounds extremely painful...”

“I got the wind knocked out of me. But even so, I managed to retreat into the safe zone thanks to the sköll bracelet.”

“Erm, and if you hadn’t managed to escape?”

“Normally, Randolph would *gently* send people flying, then someone else nearby would catch them before they hit the ground. And anyway, we always have a priest on standby. All the same, I’m glad nobody got hurt today.”

Though she wasn’t sure how large giant boars were, Dahlia knew how large Randolph was, so it made sense to her: to evade someone that large charging at

you full speed couldn't be an easy feat; to do so and then counterattack sounded even harder.

"Hey, um, I was planning on making myself a snack after I got home. Would you like to join me?" she said, knowing he was likely still hungry.

"Honestly? I'd love to. It's just I feel guilty knowing that every time I come over, you'll treat me to a delicious meal."

"If you think about the fact that you're taking me home in your coach and giving me those bicorn parts, I'm the one ripping you off."

"'Ripping you off'? Those words are hardly befitting of you, Dahlia."

"Well, neither was 'Shake me down for all the coin you like' befitting of you," she argued. That was what Volf had said the first time he'd taken her home—not that Dahlia expected him to remember.

Apparently he did. "Oh, that's right. 'You'd never,' right?" Volf put his hand under his chin, looking like he was thinking rather deeply. "I've given it some more thought, Dahlia—if you're looking to turn the Green Tower into a diner, I'll definitely invest my money. Plus, I did tell you to shake me down for all the coin you like."

"And just how did you come to that conclusion?" It was astounding how Volf could make these over-the-top jokes with a straight face, but Dahlia supposed he'd been like that since day one.

After they returned to the tower and ascended to the second floor, Dahlia threw off her coat and began preparing their meal. She had Volf sit down on the sofa and then brought him a glass of sparkling water and some shortbread. Though he had repeatedly said that he was fine, getting hit in the solar plexus might have caused hidden injuries that even he wasn't aware of, so she wanted him to sit back and take things easy.

Once she had a pot of water boiling, Dahlia took the thinnest dry pasta in her pantry and put it into the pot with a pinch of baking soda. The basicity helped transform the pasta into something akin to ramen. It wasn't a perfect match in terms of mouthfeel, but it was the best alternative there was in this world.

Next, she heated up some chicken stock and salted it heavily. Once the noodles were cooked, she placed two servings into shallow bowls and poured hot soup over them. From the refrigerator, she took some steamed and shredded chicken, boiled eggs, and green onion as a garnish. It wasn't exactly the clear chicken-based ramen that she knew from Earth, but here was her pasta noodle soup.

Dahlia surmised that Volf would prefer to cap off a night of drinking with a savory dish rather than something sweet. In her previous life, when she'd worked in an office, people around her age had tended to be in the ramen camp, while her female seniors had tended to be in the ice cream parfait camp. She had drunk with people from both factions and enjoyed snacks both savory and sweet, but either option meant waking up the very next day having gained weight. With that wisdom born of experience, Dahlia knew to exercise restraint, and so limited herself to half a portion tonight.

"This is pasta noodle soup. Feel free to add white pepper to taste." She returned to the living room with the food and chopsticks along with a fork and a rather large spoon. Try as he might, Volf couldn't hide his excitement as he sat down in front of his meal. "You can eat with whatever's easiest for you."

"Thanks for cooking!" He watched Dahlia sitting across from him to see what utensils she was using and took up a pair of chopsticks in imitation of her.

The delicious scent of chicken broth wafted up from the steaming bowls. With the addition of baking soda and a longer cooking time, the softer-than-usual noodles imitated ramen quite well. While the broth wasn't flavored with much other than chicken, the pronounced saltiness was perfect as a soup for the noodles. Originally, she'd eaten the steamed chicken and eggs as cleaner foods to aid with her diet, but they were also perfect as ramen toppings. Reflecting that pork in ramen was usually roasted, Dahlia made a mental note to roast the chicken next time.

As she ate, Dahlia was flooded with nostalgia, likely because of memories from her previous life—and memories from this life of times when she'd had this same dish with Carlo. After she had finished the noodles, she scooped the yolk out of her egg with her big spoon, mixed it into the remaining broth, and swallowed it in a single spoonful. As the yolk dissolved into the salty soup in her

mouth, she turned to Volf to find him inhaling his bowl of noodles instead of slowly chewing his food as was his wont. She worried it wasn't to his taste, but perhaps the noodles were simply easy to slurp down.

"Oh, that hits the spot," Volf sighed contently after finishing off every last drop in his bowl. His golden eyes were filled with bliss and his brow was beaded with sweat that he had yet to wipe away. It seemed that her worries had been unwarranted. "Why is the pasta noodle soup not pasta noodle soup?"

"I didn't take you for a philosopher, Volf," she quipped. "I just added a bit of baking soda to the pasta water is all."

"Is this regular ol' pasta? Or some special imported stuff?"

"It was the cheapest bulk pack I could find. Cost me about seven copper."

"Wha—? I don't get it! Why does everything magically turn delicious here?" he said, thinking long and hard.

Way to exaggerate things, Dahlia thought. Her methods were a little unconventional, but there was no magic involved. "Shall I make a bit more, then? I still have some chicken stock left."

"I'd appreciate that. And if you wouldn't mind, could you please show me how you cook the pasta?"

"Of course! I didn't think you made your own pasta in the barracks."

"No, I was thinking of doing it in the field."

"That might be a little difficult. It takes a lot of water, after all."

"We've got mages and water crystals, so I'm not worried."

He looked serious about it, but Dahlia couldn't help but think that imitation ramen might not be the best dish to make during an expedition. The soup and noodles had to be cooked separately, so that might be quite a hassle. It wasn't as though there were instant noodles in this world either; at least, it didn't seem possible with the existing technology. "Maybe we could come up with recipes that can be cooked up quickly—or rather, recipes for the camp stove? It'd mainly be simple dishes, though, like grilled meat and dipping sauce, dried seafood, cheese fondue—basically, things you've had here before."

“I appreciate the gesture, but, well...I don’t know if I want to teach the others.”

“Oh, would that be a bad idea since it’s not your responsibility?” It had slipped her mind that there were probably knights in charge of kitchen duties and that she might not be in the position to tell them what to make. Instead, it might have been better to talk to Volf through her methods and give him a few recipes for reference.

However, Volf shook his head. “No, it’s nothing like that. We wouldn’t even have the ingredients a real cook would need. It’s just... I know I’m being irrational here, but if I shared your recipes, then our Green Tower specials would seem less special.”

“Hey, that’s not true. It’s *because* we make and eat them here that they’re Green Tower specials.”

“Huh. It’s *because* we make and eat them here...” Volf muttered to himself, seemingly somewhat pensive, but he turned weirdly cheery as Dahlia showed him how to make their second bowl of pasta noodle soup.

After they finished their seconds, Volf did the dishes and then sank back into the sofa. He must’ve been tired after a long day of training, and so Dahlia tried to persuade him to let her do the dishes, but he was all smiles as he refused to compromise. Perhaps it was customary in the Order of Beast Hunters for the person who did the eating to do the cleaning as well.

“It sure would be nice if there were a restaurant that made all your recipes. Preferably close to the castle too.” Volf rested his lime-spritzed club soda on the coffee table, looking a bit sullen.

“What’s this all of a sudden?”

“The meals in our mess haven’t really been great as of late. There are a lot of mouths to feed and not a lot of time to cook, so a lot of what we eat tends to be shelf-stable. I mean, don’t get me wrong—I’m grateful to have food at all, and I know I’m acting spoiled, but I was just thinking how nice it’d be to have a decent meal.”

“It has been rather hot lately, so I suppose it wouldn’t be wise to keep food out for too long.” The castle was a big place, and so there were many knights and soldiers there who needed to eat. Cooking that many portions couldn’t be easy, but neither was safely storing food and ingredients. Dahlia wondered if there weren’t any magical tools that could help. “Does the mess have industrial-sized magical stoves or refrigerators?”

“From what I can tell, the stoves are a smidge bigger than regular magical stoves, and there are dozens of them lined up. We’ve got a larder for meat and other perishable ingredients, but they don’t keep any prepared meals there.”

“It would help to have large stoves and large refrigerators, but you’d need a magical toolmaker or mage from the castle to craft something like that.”

“A royal toolmaker, huh? Word is that they focus on tools for scientific research, but I’ve got no concrete idea of what they actually craft.”

Tools for scientific research? Now those were enticing words. They *had* to be inventing fantastical things like rings of invisibility, or flying carpets, or bottomless storage chests, right? Or maybe they were researching dullahans or cursed swords? Or even mobile continents? Something grand like the Philosopher’s Stone, perhaps? Dahlia had a feeling this speculation was going to stick in her head for a while.

“Would you be able to make large-scale tools, Dahlia?”

“No way. I wouldn’t have enough magic, considering that I’d have to make the tool and then enchant it too. Besides, anything that size couldn’t be transported easily, so I’d have to make it on-site. Could you imagine how much concentration that would take?”

“But you concentrate well, don’t you?”

“Sure, as well as anybody else does normally, but we’re talking about working at the castle here!” Dahlia had been twice and it had been nerve-racking each time. With all that had happened during her visits, she would like to avoid the castle in the future if she could help it.

“Well, once you work there long enough, you get used to it.”

“That idea alone is terrifying...”

He chuckled along with her. Volf had lived and worked at the castle while Dahlia was still a commoner; she didn't expect him to understand her feelings.

"Speaking of the castle, that bacon we had after the formalities was delightful. Where is it from?" she asked, changing the topic.

"That was giant hog bacon made at a pig farm along the eastern highway. Remember the assistant manager at The Black Cauldron? He was the one who introduced me to it. The order's even going to buy from them now too."

Dahlia recalled that The Black Cauldron had offered a wide and tasty variety of offerings, so it came as no surprise that they'd have quality bacon as well. The meat was likely going to keep very well, considering it was a recommendation from a former Beast Hunter. "That's wonderful news! I'm glad you'll have something so delicious on your expeditions from now on."

"Oh, the squad will be happy for sure. After we had the bacon, Captain Grato brought the camp stove to the duty room and did the same thing for the other knights. Believe me when I say they followed their noses." With how good that bacon had smelled, it was no wonder it had attracted everyone. The only concern had been whether the captain had brought enough. "Thanks to that, everybody was gung ho about the giant boar exercise today."

"Because of the similarity between boars and hogs?"

"You could say that. Lots of boars in the mountains out east, but each sounder only has one male. The alpha chases all of the other younger males away, but that means that they try to get at the pigs on the farm."

"Is it because they're trying to get their own territory?"

"Well, they only raise giant gilts for the sake of easier management and higher-quality meat, so you can probably see why a young boar would find the farm appealing. The pig farms have their own line of defense, but in the summer and autumn, when lots of boars show up, we get summoned to help out."

"Oh, so each of the young males is looking for his Ms. Piggy." The scent of bacon must've encouraged the knights to put their best efforts into their training as well. Dahlia felt a little sorry for the young giant boars, though.

Perhaps the giant sows felt a little cross-species attraction too.

“Not Ms. Piggy in the singular, I’m afraid. Since boars aren’t monogamous, a male would take a harem of twenty or more female hogs away with him, and that just wouldn’t be profitable for the farm.” His words changed Dahlia’s mind. The giant boars *ought* to be culled, for the safety of the order and to protect that scrumptious bacon. “The proprietor did also say that boar bacon had a certain gaminess that’s a different kind of delicious.”

“Giant boar bacon...”

“They also said if we brought freshly slain boars to the farm, they’d turn them into bacon for us on the cheap. Kinda makes me want to be extra careful not to damage the meat!” Volf’s eyes gleamed; those were not the eyes of a knight but the eyes of a predator. If the other knights heard about the prospect of extra bacon, Dahlia was sure they’d look the same way.

“Hey. Give training your all, okay?” said Dahlia as she prayed silently for the peaceful repose of the slain boars.

Volf suddenly looked up as he was squeezing a wedge of lime into his carbonated water. “Going back to what Dominic talked about earlier, are you planning to go for a barony, Dahlia?”

“He had me convinced. It’ll be good for me, but some may say I don’t know my place...” The prospect was daunting, but she wanted it. “How about you? It won’t be long until you’re eligible, right?”

“Yeah, it’ll take but a few more years. But if I beg my family for a recommendation, I might even make baron now. It’s just that...”

“It’s a bit of a bother?”

“That, and I’d also feel weird about outranking my seniors. I haven’t really contributed much to the order yet.”

“You’re a Scarlet Armor. That means a lot already.”

“Sure, the Scarlet Armors get a lot of attention, but all I do is fight at the forefront. I haven’t even suffered any grave injuries. Shieldsmen like Randolph

get terribly injured so much more often, yet they get the same amount of hazard pay as everyone else. Not to mention, we get a bigger pension as barons.” Dahlia would have said that getting picked off by a wyvern had been grave enough, but she couldn’t find her voice. “Plus, I don’t know whether becoming a baron would make things better or worse for me personally.”

Would that mean more or fewer noblewomen would try to woo him? As someone who avoided any form of romance, he’d like to avoid additional trouble if he could, Dahlia presumed. “It sounds to me as though you have a lot to gain from it, so it wouldn’t be that bad an idea.”

“I dunno. Oh, maybe we could get our ranks together.”

Dahlia hesitated before responding. “With how different our lines of work are, I’m not going to hold you to it.”

She had almost told him not to bother. One needed ten years as a Scarlet Armor, but how many more did Volf have to fulfill? And in that time, would he be hurt? Would he survive to continue visiting the tower? None of these were questions she could or should ask him. Dahlia bit her tongue and forced a smile, then took a sip from her glass. Never had she thought lime and soda could leave such a terribly acrid taste in her mouth.

“If you become baroness, will you move to the nobles’ quarter?”

Volf’s sudden question came as a surprise. Barony wasn’t a hereditary title, so she wouldn’t be able to pass it on to her apprentices were she to take any in the future. She would have the prerogative of moving to the noble’s quarter, but she had never considered it given that she had the Green Tower already.

“No. Father stayed here at the tower after becoming a baron and I plan to do the same.”

“Oh, good. In that case, do you think I could keep visiting you here?”

There was a certain sense of relief in his smile, and for whatever reason, that brought her some reassurance in turn. A smile swelled up from the bottom of her heart, replacing the one she had forced. “Of course. I’ll be expecting you.”

Interlude: The Master of the Merchants' Guild & the Noble Way

As Ivano was organizing a few files and documents, he was summoned by the guildmaster. It wasn't long until he would be officially finished with his role in the Merchants' Guild. The summons could've been a congratulatory message or it could've been about some noble or other—whatever the reason, Ivano put on his navy suit jacket before making his way to Jedda's office.

"Thanks for coming by, Ivano. Are you free today?" asked Gabriella, sitting on a black leather sofa. The viscount was sitting behind his desk at the back of the room while a male attendant waited on him at his side.

"I can open up my morning; however, I have an appointment with Chairman Zola in the afternoon."

"I see. I was wondering, do you happen to have any news for us?" Evidently, word of his meeting with Fortunato yesterday had somehow already traveled to her.

Gabriella ordered Ivano to take a seat opposite her on the sofa, and after doing so, he intertwined his fingers. "Yes, I have, but first, I was hoping to ask about Mr. Fortunato Luini, the master of the Tailors' Guild."

"Since you have given us the nobles' market for the foaming soap dispensers for the next two years, would you accept some information as thanks for your generosity?"

"Yes, that would be fine."

"What do you know already?"

"The former guildmaster retired last year due to a sudden bout of illness, leaving Mr. Forto to take the role. After training in chivalry during high school, he chose to work at the Tailors' Guild for some reason. He was very popular amongst noblewomen. Though he was his father's secondborn son, he was selected to be heir. His wife comes from an earldom and is well known for her

beauty and strong will. Together, they have a son and a daughter. That is all I have managed to gather.”

“Impressive, but allow me to add a few details.” Gabriella closed her eyes briefly, then opened them and looked directly into Ivano’s. “Fortunato Luini comes from a long line of knights. Because his family’s fortune declined in the generation preceding his, he took a position at the Tailors’ Guild after having desperately promoted himself. He immediately found the patronage of certain noblewomen, which brought him great success both as a businessman and as a socialite. Six years ago, he married the daughter of an earl and then was promoted to vice-guildmaster. He still keeps close company with noblewomen, and I’ve heard that he still personally handles the wardrobes of a number of older married noblewomen in high standing.”

Viscount Jedda added, “Lord Fortunato has one older and two younger brothers in the royal knights. All three of them are proficient with the blade, though perhaps they are not as skilled with underhanded tactics. His elder brother wishes to be a career knight and thus yielded the inheritance to Fortunato; his younger brothers have been adopted into the family of a viscount and the family of a textile merchant, respectively.”

All four siblings had turned out splendidly and done very well for themselves, so Ivano knew better than to make an enemy of Fortunato if he wanted to have any business even remotely related to tailoring.

“May I also ask about this here? How much would you say it is worth?” Ivano asked, unfolding a handkerchief to reveal a silver ring—the very one he had received from Fortunato.

“What about it?” Jedda’s baritone voice boomed from the opposite side of his desk.

“I received this as a gift from Mr. Forto when we were drinking yesterday evening. He claims that it counters poison, confusion, and aphrodisiacs.”

“Appraise it,” ordered Jedda.

This prompted his attendant to collect the ring and then examine it with a blue-lensed loupe. “Yes, it certainly grants all three effects, though only to a moderate degree.”

“Erm, how much would it cost at a magical tool shop?”

“I would estimate around five gold, sir.”

The shocking price tag rendered Ivano speechless. Five gold was a hair over his monthly salary. He had accepted a valuable gift without giving it much thought at the time, a fact that now caused him some anxiety. “Perhaps it was not something I should have accepted.”

“Wouldn’t you say he had some reason of his own for wanting you to have it?” Gabriella argued. “I presume he either tried to headhunt you or to pry into the business of the Rossetti Trading Company.”

“Mr. Forto gave me herbed wine, then asked me some things about Ms. Dahlia. Well, neither Ms. Dahlia nor I have any skeletons in our closets, so there was little intrigue I could offer him.”

“Herbed wine, you say?”

“Yes, he said it works to relax one’s lips, though it worked too well and I bit through my lower lip. I ruined a handkerchief, but thankfully, he had a potion on hand. It was after that he gave me the ring. Not a bad trade, wouldn’t you agree?” Ivano said in a particularly cheerful tone. He was hoping to mitigate some of the wrath he might otherwise have brought down upon himself for accepting Fortunato’s invitation last night without telling anyone.

“You don’t say.” Gabriella narrowed her eyes so that her gaze, like the fine point of a needle, pierced through him. One corner of her crimson lips turned up ever so slightly as she pressed two fingers to her temple. It was at this moment that Ivano knew he had made a grave error. “I see that not only did the master of the Tailors’ Guild Mr. Fortunato permit you to call him ‘Forto,’ he even bestowed upon you a lesson in the noble way.”

“Madam Gab—” Her name got caught in Ivano’s throat as he trembled in his seat. He understood from her demeanor that she was in high dudgeon. There wasn’t anyone who could soothe her now, save for perhaps her husband if he weren’t also visibly seething behind his smile. Ivano was inclined to wave the white flag—or rather, he wished there were someone to rescue him.

“Dear, don’t you think we ought to return the favor?”

“Yes, darling, I completely agree,” said the viscount. “The Esterland silk we sell wholesale to Lord Fortunato—shall we raise the price by, say, ten percent?”

“An excellent idea.” Their icy smiles sent a chill down Ivano’s spine, now dripping in cold sweat.

“Oh, erm, I have healed up perfectly thanks to his potion. And, uh, I have even been given the ring, so surely, umm...” stammered Ivano. While the noble way of conducting business vexed him to no end, he bore no grudge toward Forto. However, what was worrying was the fact that Forto might bear a grudge toward him if the Jeddas retaliated in this manner. Ivano tried to finish his sentence, but a pair of pitch-black eyes stared his way.

“You are wrong in assuming that this is for your sake, Ivano. No, this is for me as both master of the Merchants’ Guild and guarantor of the Rossetti Trading Company. Further, an attack on my wife’s disciple simply cannot be ignored. That is not how the Jedda family operates.”

It was only after Viscount Jedda had spoken that Ivano realized how frigid the man could be. At the same time, the viscount’s words finally drove home the point that the Jeddas, too, were nobles. The three of them had worked together for so long, and yet hitherto, Ivano had only seen the faces they showed to commoners.

“I myself am not too familiar with the noble way, so I shall delegate the task to my husband,” said Gabriella.

“Yes, I shall take command. If Lord Fortunato wishes to sow seeds of discord, then war is what he will reap. The only choice in your hands, Ivano, is whether I battle as guarantor of the company or as his fellow guildmaster.”

In the past, Jedda had always seemed to keep a tight rein on his emotions, in contrast with the belligerent man now sitting before Ivano. In retrospect, it should have been obvious that a wholly calm and stolid fellow could never remain master of the Merchants’ Guild for as long as Jedda had. However, at this rate, Ivano thought it was likely that he’d have to apologize to Forto. “Oh, I’m so very grateful! But I was hoping to repay Mr. Forto personally, so please...”

He bowed his head low, but the Jeddas kept a lengthy silence in the room.

“My hand has been forced. I haven’t any choice but to raise the price of Esterland white silk by twenty percent.”

“I feel as though we are still being far too kind, but so be it, dear.”

“Um, is white silk not the fabric of choice for wedding gowns in the circle of aristocrats?” Ivano asked.

“Yes, it’s the obvious choice for elites,” she answered.

“Twenty percent is perhaps too kind, but it is as far as I shall compromise. Oh, and Ivano, address me as Leone from now on. Tell Miss Dahlia to do the same.”

“What.” Viscount Jedda allowed only a select few to address him by his given name, yet he had just told—if not *commanded*—Ivano to do so. Even chairpeople in the Merchants’ Guild who addressed Gabriella by her first name wouldn’t dare do the same to Leone.

“A name holds some weight amongst nobles. I see nary a problem, given that I am a guarantor of the company.”

Ivano bowed once again. “Thank you very much.” His gratitude was genuine. As soon as he thought he knew how the nobility operated, he was proven wrong. There was no way he could fight back, as he didn’t know the rules of war under which they operated. Right now, he and the Rossetti Trading company were but chicks under Leone’s sheltering wings.

“You ought not mention this predicament to Sir Volfred. Miss Dahlia would be severely hurt too. Save it for when they are ready.”

“Not even Sir Volf?”

“He is mild-mannered, but I cannot say the same of his family. The Tailors’ Guild has only had their guildmaster for less than a year; if it became necessary to replace him so soon, that would be unpleasant for all parties involved.”

It was difficult to understand the disturbing words that the Jeddas were so casually throwing around. Ivano had always found Volf’s presence calming—his good looks aside—so it was hard to imagine that the Scalfarottos could be as unforgiving as the Jeddas claimed.

“Forgive me for interrupting your conversation, Mr. Leone, but it is almost

time for your other obligations today,” his attendant chimed in.

“I see. Time to visit the castle. It seems that there are yet two or three more things I need to settle.”

When Leone stood up from his desk, there seemed to be the slightest hint of joy on his face. Ivano had no way of finding out for sure, but he could tell it portended nothing good. He and Gabriella saw the viscount off.

“Madam Gabriella, um, perhaps I spoke too freely of Mr. Forto. It merely seems to me that this matter has gotten rather out of hand...” Ivano said bluntly, as though he were complaining. Perhaps he was still frightened by the Jeddas.

“I would have overlooked it all had Fortunato charmed you with his words, drowned you in liquor, or surrounded you with the finest women. However, truth serum in wine goes against an unwritten code. Not to mention, nobles have a duty to pay back in kind any damage done to their own people, so I’m sure Fortunato is already expecting all of this.”

“Nobles sure are a pain...” A persistent pain since yesterday, apparently. It was another side of society that Ivano knew too little of. Even if he learned of all of their proprieties, business and diplomacy with aristocrats seemed far out of reach.

“Perhaps. Herbed wine is a noble’s welcome, if not a warm one. I should have taught you more about these matters, but I am far from qualified. Shall I introduce you to someone through my husband?”

“I appreciate the gesture, but no, thank you. I need to graduate from my status as a disciple, you see.” Leone had just said that “an attack on my wife’s disciple cannot be ignored”; Ivano accepted their sheltering wings, but he didn’t want to depend upon their benevolence any more than he already had. Thankfully, the chick that was the Rossetti Trading Company was capable of hunting its own grub. Soon, they needed to find their wings and leave the nest, and perhaps one day, their wings would clash with those of the Merchants’ Guild. “For the time being, I will look into having Chairman Zola or Mr. Forto as my teacher. Perhaps the ultimate objective on which I set my sights will be to

prosper alongside Mr. Forto as an equal.”

“Prosper as an equal, you say? Hmm...” Gabriella narrowed her eyes like a felid and buried her gaze in his flesh like a brace of claws. Ivano had learned that was a look not of skepticism but of concern.

“Well, to tell you the truth, I plan to beat him at his own game. Before I grow senile, at least.”

“Before that and while I still breathe, if you will. It would be a glorious thing to see my disciple’s decisive victory before I die.”

It was a tall order. Ivano replied with a wry smile, “That’ll be at least another twenty years or so, master.”

Fried Chicken and the Guy Friend

“Hey, Marcello. It’s been a while... Er, I hope I’m not being overly familiar.”

“Not at all. If anythin’, I ought to be the one askin’—you sure it’s okay for me to speak to you like this?”

Up on the second floor of the Green Tower, the two men sat on sofas across from each other. A faint beam of the dying sunlight shone through a window, dyeing the living room red.

“That’s how Dahlia and I speak anyway. It’s just not in me to be profusely polite.”

“Yeah, I get you. I’m not gonna try too hard to mind my manners, but you let me know if I start steppin’ on your toes, all right? Oh, and how should I address you? Sir Volfred? Sir Volf?”

“Let’s drop the honorifics. It’s hard to relax at the tower when I’m being called ‘Sir.’”

“Hah, sure thing then, Volf.” *What, you think you’re inside your own home?* was what Marcello wanted to say, but he chose not to crack a joke at his host’s expense.

Marcello and his wife were over at Dahlia’s today, and as luck would have it, all four of them had their schedules free, so the two ladies were toiling in the kitchen to prepare dinner. The two guys had tried to offer their help but were rejected, with Irma telling them to handle the cleanup instead. It was all too apparent she didn’t trust Marcello’s culinary skills. That had left them to make some slightly stilted small talk.

“What’s up with your glasses? They make your eyes dance around...” Marcello remarked. “Take them off for a moment?”

Volf paused ever so briefly before replying. “Sure,” he said as he complied.

The difference was flabbergasting. Volf’s eyes turned from a gentle green to a

glimmering gold. His quiet demeanor vanished as soon as the glasses left his face, revealing such a look as could make any heart skip a beat—be it a lady's or otherwise. Marcello had little doubt that the spectacles were magical, and he came to understand Volf's anxiety. "That's rough, buddy. No wonder you need a magical tool for that. Bet you're more popular than you'd like."

"I sure as hell don't ask for the attention." There was no hesitation to his answer; Volf's detestation for his good looks was undeniable.

"No kiddin'. But I'm sure most guys would like to have a problem like that for themselves."

"Um, behind you, Marcello..."

As soon as he heard Volf's considerate words, Marcello felt something cling onto his back.

"Oh, you'd like to have a problem like that, you say?"

"I said *most* guys would, but you know I'm not most guys. How could I be envious when I have you, hon?"

Marcello's darling wife had snuck up and chided him in a low tone right up against his ear. He was just a *little* mortified, but he made it a point of not showing it.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Sir Scalfarotto. I'm Marcello's wife, Irma Nuvolari." She quickly withdrew from his side and bowed to Volf.

"The pleasure is all mine. My name is Volfred Scalfarotto. Please just call me Volf, and there's no need to be so formal with me. I was just telling Marcello the same thing."

"Is that right? It wouldn't be churlish of us?"

"Of course not."

Irma's chestnut eyes stared straight into Volf's, and he both perked and tensed up. "You don't see golden eyes like that every day. Pretty," she said coolly. Her gaze was full of curiosity—nothing more, nothing less.

"Thanks."

His voice was filled with such relief that Marcello realized just how great of a source of trouble Volf's good looks were to him. "You get that guarded, eh? Must really be awful for ya."

"Sorry for being so self-conscious..." Volf muttered in embarrassment.

"Nothin' to be sorry about. You're just being careful, that's all. And you nobles especially ought to be." Marcello was a commoner, but he'd heard stories about the aristocracy and how people with looks as good as Volf's tended to get solicited or taken advantage of. That was all good looks got people in their circle. It must have been quite the burden for him.

"Do you frequent noble estates, Marcello?"

"I'm a courier with the Couriers' Guild, so I've set foot in quite a few. I've also heard that pretty noblewomen have it hard too..." He trailed off, but no one dared to pry further.

"You're definitely pretty, Volf, but to me, you're just some guy."

"Don't take offense at what my wife said. She just has really niche tastes." Marcello tried to soften Irma's words, but that only led to Volf giving him a queer look.

"In all my years, I've only seen one handsome man, and he's married to me," she said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to say.

Marcello wasn't sure whether Irma's taste in men was weird or *she* was weird, but he was confident that she had never fallen for any man other than himself. As a hairdresser, she examined all sorts of men and women up close, but never had she felt anything like she did for Marcello. It wasn't long after the two first met that Irma looked at him with blazing affection, yet surprisingly enough, that flame still burned to this day. Still, the bluntness of her words made his cheeks turn pink even now.

"Heh! Look at him. Witness the power of love!" she boasted.

"How enviable," Volf muttered. His golden eyes turned up at the corners as if he were smiling.

But the line of Volf's lips remained flat, and all Marcello saw in his eyes was

loneliness. His blush vanished. He didn't understand why Volf should be so lonely, considering that he had Dahlia. "What've you got to envy? I bet you've got yourself dozens of cuties wrapped around your finger."

"You don't think you're an order of magnitude off?"

"Damn. You've got hundreds, then?"

"Zero, Marcello; I don't have a single person like that."

"No shit? Don't tell me you've never dated or anythin'. Wait, what about you and Dahlia?"

"Dahlia and I are just friends. She'd be"—Volf paused for a beat—"wasted on me." It was self-deprecating, certainly, but it didn't sound like a joke. His wavering gaze said he had already resigned himself to being lonesome. Marcello couldn't find the right words.

"'Wasted on him'? Lots of different ways to take that..." Irma said in such a quiet whisper that only her husband could have heard her.

Marcello subtly nodded as he looked back into the man's golden eyes. Ever since they had first met, something about Volf had worried him. Dahlia had been fresh out of her engagement and the last thing Marcello had wanted was for her to be hurt again. He needed to suss out the knight's character. "I bet you're a pretty tough guy, Volf, what with you being in the Order of Beast Hunters and all."

"I don't know about that. There are many knights in my squad who are stronger than I am."

"Wanna put it to the test? Wrestle with me a little."

"Like sparring?"

"Yeah, that's right. Just for a bit in the yard."

"I mean, I suppose I could..."

Though Volf was decidedly reluctant and unenthusiastic, Marcello pretended to be oblivious and jumped out of his seat. "All right! We'll be back in a bit then, hon."

“Oh? Where did Volf and Marcello go?” asked Dahlia as she walked out of the kitchen with a couple of plates. Instead of the baggy gray dress she had worn routinely up till last year, the hostess had on an airy aqua sundress—one that Irma loved on Dahlia. On top of it was a white apron for practical purposes.

“They’re out in the yard wrestling. Don’t worry; they’ll be back before long.”

“Wrestling? Why?”

“That’s just how boys are. Last time they went drinking together, he and Tobias sparred for a bit too.”

“Huh. News to me.” Tobias wasn’t one to do something like that, nor, she imagined, could he be very good at it. Besides, how could he have beaten Marcello’s bulk? Dahlia just couldn’t understand why he’d done it.

“He was probably too embarrassed to mention it to you, heh.”

“What do you mean?”

“The guy only lasted ten seconds before he fell on his rear end, meaning he lost the match to Marcello. I guess with Tobias being a magical toolmaker, he doesn’t really have the right physique anyway.”

“Sure, I guess. But, I mean, Volf...” Volf was an active member of the Beast Hunters. Although his opponents were monsters and not other humans, Dahlia couldn’t see how he would ever lose to Marcello.

“You know, Marcello’s never lost a single bout since I’ve met him?”

“Sure, but Volf’s a knight—he fights for a living.” Unlike Irma, Dahlia worried. She didn’t want to see either of them get his body or pride hurt.

“Sounds like a fair matchup to me. Let’s get back to the kitchen; we’ve got to get everything ready by the time they come back, and when they do, we’ll ask who won,” Irma said with a laugh, placing a hand on Dahlia’s shoulder. The setting sun glinted on the ruddy brown gemstone affixed to the golden engagement bracelet on her wrist. “Not that my Marcello’s gonna lose, though.”



The two men went down to a barren patch in the tower’s backyard. Marcello

twisted and stretched, which Volf presumed to be in preparation for their showdown.

“This here looks as good a spot as any. You got strengthenin’ magic too, right, Volf? In that case, let’s say no magic attacks.”

“I can’t express my magic anyway.”

“Nothin’ to worry about, then.”

“Give me a moment. Let me take this off first.” Volf twisted the sköll bracelet off of his wrist and wrapped it in a handkerchief before placing it on top of a nearby rock. Not that he expected to do so, but if he were to use it against Marcello accidentally, it’d be too late to say sorry.

“Good idea. Irma’s gonna get bent out of shape if this does too.” He slipped off his garnet-studded gold engagement bracelet and tucked it into his back pocket. “Since we’re grappling, the first one on his back loses. That sound good to you?”

“Yeah, fine by me.” Volf’s brows knitted; he wasn’t about to let his opponent win, but he didn’t want to hurt him either.

“I bet you’re just thinking how much to hold back, aren’t you?”

“I was thinking about how not to hurt you.”

“Hey, if *either* of us gets hurt, I’m sure Dahlia will give us a potion.”

It seemed to Volf that Dahlia’s good friend enjoyed getting physical, or perhaps that was simply normal for common folk. Volf had sparred with other knights in training, but wrestling wasn’t in their repertoire. And though he had been in bar brawls before, that wasn’t quite the same either. As Volf bore no animosity toward Marcello, he didn’t want to hurt him—not in the least because he was Dahlia’s friend. “Shall we?”

Marcello was a tad shorter than Volf but had the broadness and bulk to make up for it. His tanned complexion and virile build compared to those in the Order of Beast Hunters. “You ready to rumble?”

“Whenever you are.”

At the very moment Volf responded, he was startled by the surprising speed

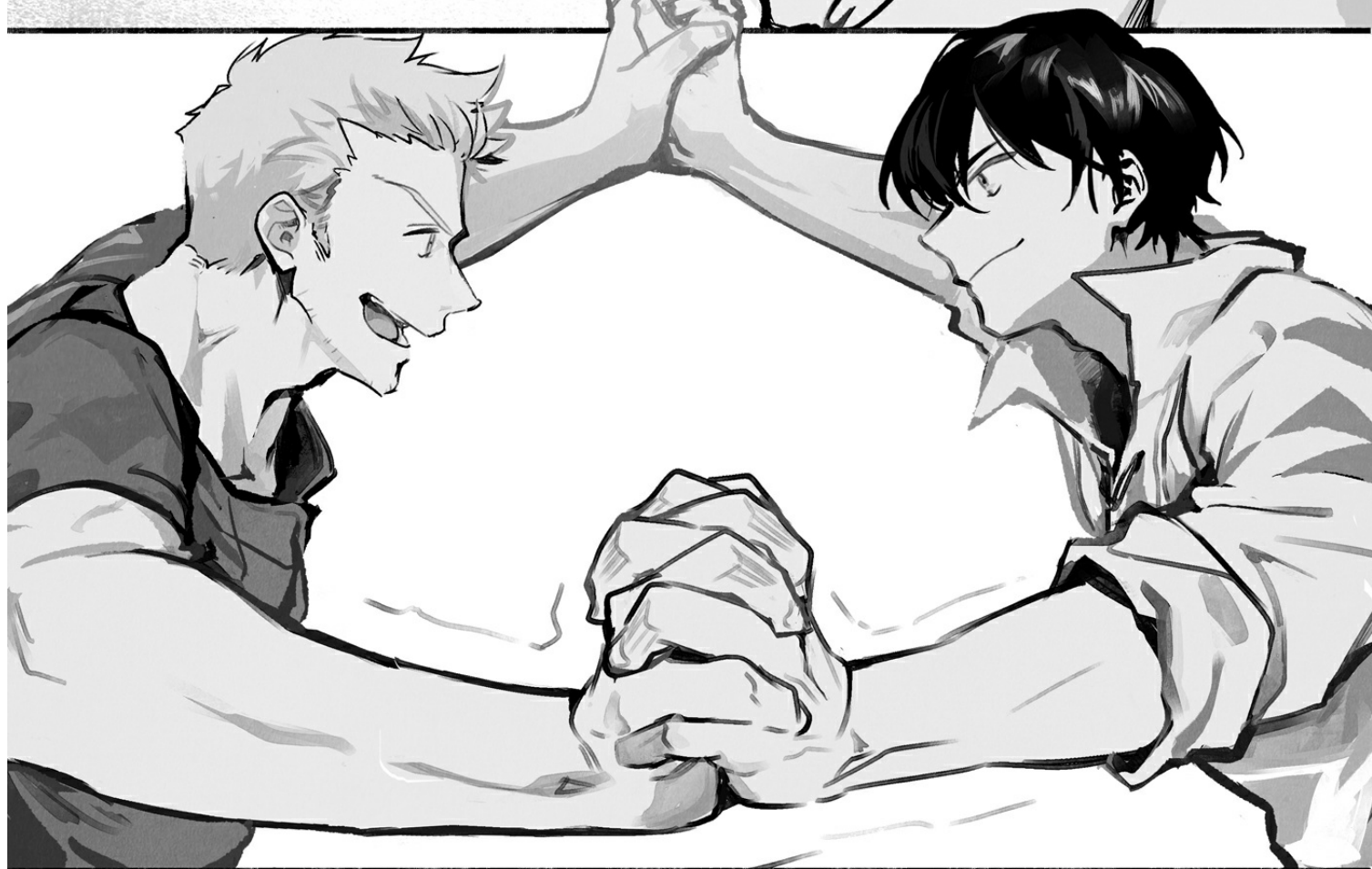
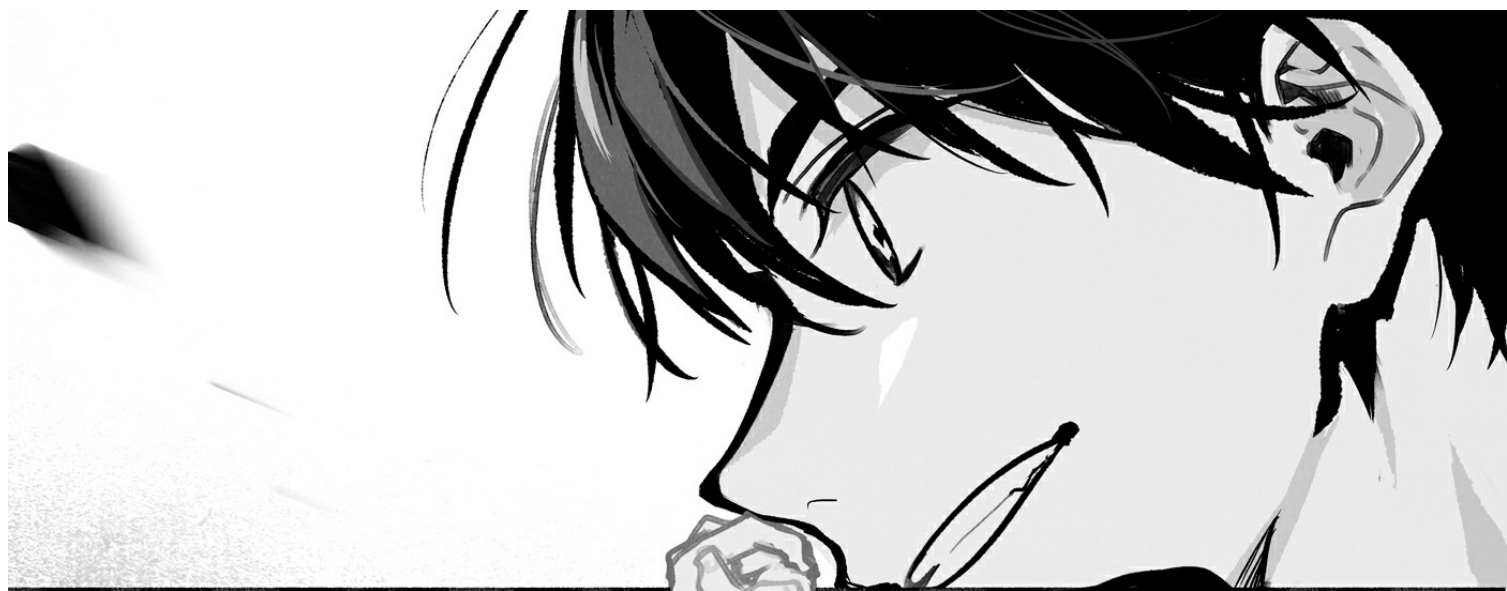
at which Marcello advanced. Marcello's hand came up diagonally in an attempt to snatch at Volf's collar, and Volf used his left hand to deflect it before using his right to clench Marcello by the shoulder. He assumed all he had to do was sweep Marcello's legs to end the bout.

But just as Volf made sure not to get too heated so as to avoid injuring his opponent, Marcello dropped down a head's height. Volf instinctively tried to release his grasp on Marcello's shoulder and to backstep. However, Marcello already had a decisive grip on his arm, so Volf was forced to thrust his arm forward to break the hold. Marcello released his grip only to lock Volf's other arm by the elbow. Volf didn't know whether to pick the safe choice of tapping out or to use strengthening magic on his arm and break free.

"Oh, what do I have to do to get you to try, Volf?" Marcello quickly let go of Volf's arm. His burnt umber eyes had a terrible look of disappointment.

Volf's shame hurt more than the ache in his elbow. He'd assumed he had to go easy on Marcello, but Volf was the one being shown mercy now. "Apologies. It was unsportsmanlike of me. Allow me to test my strength."

After casting strengthening magic on himself, Volf extended his palms toward Marcello, who locked hands with him in a duel of raw power. The two men pushed and pushed, but they both held fast, resulting in a stalemate. Where they dug their heels in, they left trenches in the earth.



“You’re even tougher than you look, Marcello.”

“Right back at ya. Wanna raise the stakes? We’ll okay strikes below the shoulders, but let’s not go breaking any bones.”

It finally clicked for Volf when he saw Marcello’s near-barbarous smile: no-holds-barred was what he’d wanted all along. And if that’s what he wanted, that’s what he’d have. “Sounds good to me. Let me apologize in advance if I go too hard; if I break anything, I’ll take you to the priests.”

“Oh, I’m looking forward to the lovely ladies tearing us a new one on our ride to the temple.”

“Heh. Let’s go, big guy.”

The two men struck each other, and with their strengthening spells, the contact rang out like the sound of two pieces of heavy and dense wood striking together. *Can I strike harder? Can I strike faster?* Every punch hit harder and faster, both Volf and Marcello exploring each other’s limits.

Volf guarded a powerful punch from Marcello that shook his bones, smirking as he countered with a kick that Marcello blocked in turn. It felt as though he’d kicked the trunk of a tall oak tree, and his leg, magically strengthened though it was, shook to its core.

Close combat, bare knuckles, full-strength kicks—training with his squad could never offer the actual, raw fighting he was experiencing here. It was novel and positively electrifying. There were no lives on the line, nothing to protect, no onlookers, and no social standings involved. The thrill of the fight dulled the pain of every blow received—*Get one more punch in. Just another good kick*—only to be interrupted by the sound of cloth ripping. The two of them stopped in their tracks.

“Oh, shit, I’m sorry; I got caught on your shirt and ripped it,” Marcello said.

“No worries. The fabric was really thin and all.” Marcello’s fist must’ve glanced off of Volf’s body before tearing his shirt straight down the torso. It wasn’t until now that Volf realized only moments remained before the sun completely set. “You’re real tough, Marcello. Wanna join our order?”

“Me? No, I’m a scaredy-cat. If I saw a monster, I’d probably break down and cry.”

Volf laughed as he fiddled with the loose threads. “We kinda overdid it, huh?”

Marcello checked himself over. Both of their arms were riddled with bruises. Volf didn’t want to roll up his pant legs, as he knew that dull pain couldn’t be anything good anyway.

“What the hell are you two doing?!”

The men whipped around at the sudden holler that came from behind them. There, a woman stood breathing raggedly, her temper as fiery as the color of her hair.

“D-Dahlia...”

“Oh, Dahlia, we’re just, um...”

Volf and Marcello, respectively, tried to find the right words at the same time, but her absolute fury cut them short.

“I came to see what the ruckus was all about, and it turns out you two weren’t wrestling but brawling?!” Dahlia did have a point—they’d strayed a little too far from merely wrestling.

“We weren’t *brawling*, but we were, uh, sparring.”

“Yeah, guys like us use our fists to do the talkin’...”

“Yeah, and look at the damage you’ve done to each other with your bare-knuckle fistfighting!”

The two men stood frozen with fear. Never before had they seen Dahlia this livid.

Just then, Irma slowly strolled up behind her. “Marcello, you’ve gone and ripped Volf’s shirt. Or did you mean to get a peek at his abs?”

“My man’s got a rippin’ six-pack!”

“I suppose it’s no surprise that a Beast Hunter stays in top shape.”

“Oh, you’d best bet. Volf’s biceps and quads are rock—”

“What are you guys on about?! Gah!” interjected Dahlia. “Dinner’s almost ready, so I’m heading back to finish up!”

With Dahlia stomping her way back up the tower, that left the couple trying to stifle a chuckle and Volf standing there in a daze.

“You know, Dahlia saw you two from the window up there and got really worried. I reassured her that you were just horsing around, but she rushed down the stairs at full speed and even tumbled down a step,” Irma explained.

“I guess she’s not used to seeing us roughhousin’ since she didn’t grow up with brothers,” Marcello reasoned.

“Yeah, so I couldn’t get through to her that you two weren’t really fighting.” She laughed softly, albeit with a slightly troubled tone in her voice.

“We messed up, didn’t we? I’ve got to apologize to her,” Volf said.

“Yeah, we totally got carried away. I’ll go too.”

Volf retrieved his sköll bracelet as Marcello slipped on his engagement bracelet. Then the three of them returned to the tower.

“See the chipped step there, Marcello? That’s what tripped her up.” Irma illuminated the way with a magical lantern.

“Gimme a tick. I’ll fix that.” He held his right hand above the step and channeled his magic into the missing chunk. With just a few moments, Marcello had patched it up with dark gray stone as if it had never been chipped in the first place.

“Oh, I didn’t know you could cast earth magic, Marcello.”

“I’m just all right at it.”

Meanwhile, Irma used the lantern to check over the other steps for any damage. “Over here too, Marcello. It’s still only a slight crack, but it’ll be bad if it spreads.”

“Sure, I’ll get it next. I guess with Tobias gone, there’s no one to—er, forget what I just said.” His expression soured as he tried to gloss things over.

“That’s Dahlia’s ex-fiancé, right? He’s the one who used to fix up the tower?”

“Yeah, more or less.”

“Is there anything else that needs attention since he’s gone?”

“Volf, you said you and Dahlia were just friends?”

“Well, she’s always taking good care of me, so I figured I ought to return the favor and help her out too.”

Irma turned around to the conversing men and looked straight at Volf with her garnet eyes. “You see, Volf, word out on the street is that she’s *under your care*.”

“It’s nothing like that. We really are just friends and nothing more.”

“I don’t know whether Dahlia needs attention or not, but Tobias used to handle the manual work, like holding the bags when they went out shopping, getting couriers to deliver materials, or finding someone to mend fences. Stuff like that,” Marcello explained as he lightly kicked the step, testing out his handicraft. “He used to tend to stuff she’d never notice, like fixing the steps or the flooring. Didn’t want her to take a spill, he said, so I told him I’d help wherever I could. Oh, Tobias would also take her place in any difficult business meetings and field complaints since he didn’t want Dahlia to have to deal with people being nasty to her. Though she’s got Ivano to help her with that now.”

“Marcello.” Either Irma was calling his name to cut short that line of talk or she didn’t want him to let Volf know any more.

Regardless, Marcello continued. “What he did to Dahlia was inexcusable and I don’t intend to excuse any of it, but he used to treat her all right. Still, if I had to say, he acted more like a protective older brother than her fiancé.”

“I see.” Volf didn’t have anything else to add, and neither did the other two. They remained silent as they searched for any more damaged steps on the staircase, then headed up to the second floor.

There, Dahlia was waiting with a black T-shirt in hand—the same one she’d lent Volf last time. “Put this on, Volf. You look like you just got mugged.”

“Thank you. And I’m sorry about earlier.”

“Me too, Dahlia. We got a bit carried away.”

“Neither of you had to go so far to tear up your clothing, you know?” Her anger had changed to concern, and that made the two men feel even more remorseful.

Volf couldn’t find a proper apology quite yet, but Marcello spoke up instead. “You’re right. We should’ve just taken off our shirts at the beginning.”

“Marcello!”

“Topless wrestling? In that case, Dahlia and I should have brought a pair of chairs and a few drinks to sit and watch,” joked Irma.

“As if! Take care of this while I finish up the cooking!” Dahlia shoved a stack of plates and several rolls of cutlery into Irma’s arms before scurrying off to the kitchen too quickly for anyone to call out to her.

“She’s mad at you,” Irma said.

“I messed with her a bit too much there. She’s just like the cat at Irma’s folks’ place.”

“What do you mean?” asked Volf.

“Dahlia really reminded me of how their cat used to hiss at me whenever I showed up back then.”

Not the most flattering turn of phrase, but it painted a picture Volf could somewhat understand. Dahlia was hardly as approachable at the moment as she was usually. Volf knew she’d either blow up in anger again or turn cold and distant; he wanted to avoid either possibility if he could.

“Our cat couldn’t stand Marcello back then since, at the time, he used to carry crates of medicinal herbs to and from the capital.”

“Apparently cats hate the smell, so what could I do, y’know? Adores me now, though.”

“You learned what to do and what not to do.”

Volf leaned forward attentively and looked at Marcello with anticipation, hoping to learn the secret to cheering Dahlia up again. “What *do* you do, then?”

“Good treats and good pats, I s’pose. Back of the ears and around the collar

are the sweet spots,” he responded.

“I see...” It was dispiriting how little that helped.

As soon as Dahlia came back with the first plate, everyone else went to the kitchen to help carry dishes out. Volf got the wine and ale going, along with preparing a bucket of ice. Then everyone sat down at the table.

Dahlia placed a bottle of potion on the table. “Volf, Marcello, drink this before we get started. The bruises on your arms are dreadful.”

“Oh, this ain’t nothin’. Just a bit of a bruise is all.”

“Yes, it’s really no big—er, on second thought, let’s split the potion, Marcello.”

“That thing’s gotta cost a pretty penny.”

“And if you don’t drink it, it’ll cost you more. Because it’s been so long since we’ve had the chance to socialize, I’ll cover it this time. Next time, you get my drinks.”

Dahlia’s piercing green gaze was fearsome. Volf knew that if he refused her now, he’d never hear the end of it.

Marcello must’ve felt her shooting daggers at him too. “Fine. I’ll let you treat me now, but I’ll get you back next time.”

“Good. I’ll take half first.”

As Volf’s fingers made contact with the glass bottle, Irma held out a small bowl. “Before you drink that potion, would you mind sparing me some?”

“Oh, are you hurt, Irma?”

“*I’m* not, but Dahlia fell down a few steps earlier,” she explained. “Now, show me your palms.”

“I’m fine,” Dahlia said after a pause, looking away in embarrassment.

Rather than indulge Dahlia, Irma took her hands. “All right. If you’re not hurt, then open them up.”

Irma dipped her finger in the bowl of potion and dotted the wounds. Dahlia

wincing, then blew on her hands, although it wasn't alcohol.

"Next, your knees; I bet you skinned them. Hitch up your skirt and—" Irma cut herself off. "You boys look away and drink your potions."

"Yes, ma'am," answered Marcello.

"Of course." Volf obediently turned around and drank his portion of the potion. As he did so, Dahlia whimpered behind their backs. He felt sorry to think how much it must've stung her.

Marcello downed his half of the potion and exclaimed, "Wow, this stuff is made of miracles. My legs don't hurt one bit anymore!"

Volf examined his own arms to find that all his bruises had dissipated. The ache in his leg had gone away too, although he hadn't noticed it as much.

"Marcello, that means you *were* hurt," admonished Dahlia.

"Right back at you."

"I'm being serious here."

"There, there, Dahlia. Hush now. No more. Marcello's a lost cause. Besides, your beer's getting warmer by the second," Irma said to soothe her.

"My dearest wife, I thought you were head over heels for me!"

"You think there's anything about you that's more important than Dahlia's cooking right now? Go on. Try me."

"You got me there."

Neither could Volf agree more. He found Irma smiling at him as she ignored Marcello dramatically hanging his head. Dahlia did the same and a sense of relief washed over Volf. Finally, the four of them clinked their glasses together and began the meal.

"The ale is courtesy of Volf; the fruit, Marcello; and the sandwiches, Irma. Feel free to add whichever dressing you'd like on your salad, and here are some quick pickles as well."

Atop a big dish of ice sat cucumber, cherry tomatoes, and bite-size pieces of blanched broccoli and carrot. Next to that dish was a plate of thinly sliced radish

and eggplant. Also on the table were thick and hearty sandwiches, a colorful assortment of fruits, grilled kraken brushed with fish sauce, and a variety of cheeses. However, there was a void right in the center.

“Time for the second fry,” Dahlia said as she got up from her seat.

“Want a hand, love?” asked Irma.

“No, just sit tight. I won’t be long.”

Volf emptied his glass as he watched Dahlia flash a big grin before disappearing into the kitchen again. The dark ale was deliciously chilled, yet he couldn’t sit still.

“Don’t worry, Volf. She’ll be back soon enough,” Irma said.

“I should be helping, though...”

“Just handle the cleanup afterward!” Irma giggled, but then she froze up when Volf replied that he’d been doing the dishes all along.

A few minutes later, Dahlia brought out a large platter that was still sizzling. “Here we are—fried chicken. I made two flavors, so be sure to try both.”

Fried chicken was a staple in diners and pubs, so it was hardly anything unusual, and yet Volf couldn’t stop salivating after encountering its particular spicy fragrance and appetizing color. As soon as everyone was permitted to dig in, he hastily stabbed a piece with his fork and popped it into his mouth.

“Oh, make sure to brush your teeth well tonight; I added loads of garlic,” warned Dahlia. Volf paid attention to what she was saying, but he didn’t stop eating.

Biting through the crispy and crunchy batter came the aromatics of both garlic and ginger. The rich, savory juice flowed from within the meat that nearly scalded the tongue. The saltiness made the bite so flavorful, and it directed the hand to a mug of cold beer. The drink cleared away the greasiness and the slight hoppy bitterness readied the palate for yet another bite. How wonderful that the dark ale complemented the fried chicken, and the chicken the ale.

“Oh, no. I’m stuck in a loop of beer and chicken,” said the man sitting beside

Volf—a sentiment with which Volf fully sympathized.

The next mountain of popcorn chicken was a hint darker, suggesting it had been fried a little longer. However, when he bit into a piece, he was surprised by its tenderness and sweetness. It was just as juicy as the first batch but the flavors were worlds apart. After he took his time savoring the bite, a gentle sweetness remained that begged for yet more beer. Too much fried chicken might have been boring, but such was not the case with the two different flavors and dark ale.

“Dahlia, what did you season this batch with?”

“I used honey and fish sauce as well as a touch of lemon. It’s just as good after it’s cooled, so it’s perfect for a packed lunch.”

“Would you mind giving me the recipe later?”

“Of course not; I’ll jot it down for you after we’re done.”

The table wasn’t very talkative; everyone was instead focused on demolishing the chicken. Within moments, both batches had evaporated.

Dahlia looked very satisfied to see the empty plates. “Do you think you have space for more? I’ll go fry up the rest that’s still marinating.”

“Love you, Dahlia!”

“Could you, please? I’ll bring you a nice lively chicken next time!”

“Please don’t. I’m not about to raise chickens in my yard,” Dahlia answered with a smile.

However, Volf was still a little bothered. “I’d like some more as well, please.”

“There’ll be lots more just as long as you help with the dishes,” Irma said.

“You’re not going to get away with just doing the dishes. I’ll have you polish the kitchen to perfection,” said Dahlia.

“All right, I’ll make sure your walls and floors sparkle too then!” Marcello chimed in.

The two of them sounded so serious that Irma couldn’t help but chuckle. “Aren’t you glad, Dahlia? Sounds like you’re getting yourself a brand-new

kitchen afterward.”

“Heh heh, I’m looking forward to it. Okay, I’ll be back in a jiffy with more chicken.” The redhead hurried to the kitchen.

Will Dahlia make both flavors? Or will she perhaps even make a totally different flavor? Volf couldn’t wait to find out. The Green Tower, Dahlia’s company, relaxed conversation, good wine and food—only in the past few months had he experienced these joys. On the other side of the coin, though, lurked anxiety. There was no way Volf could return to the life he had led before. “We should drink again someday.”

Marcello answered immediately with zero hesitation, though Volf was more or less mumbling to himself. “Seconded. You and Dahlia should come to our place next time.”

“We’ll be waiting. I’ll show off what I can do in the kitchen,” said Irma.

“I’d love to, if we wouldn’t be imposing.” It filled Volf with delight to be able to chitchat like this. At the same time, he looked down at the ground, anxious about whether the Nuvolaris were just being polite.

“Do you need us to be hush-hush? We could call you ‘Wolf’ when you have your glasses on. And if you sneak over, we’d have airtight alibis,” suggested Marcello.

“Hey, that’s not a bad plan. If the glasses aren’t enough, you can come over in the evening too.”

“You two are very thoughtful. Thank you.” Volf was embarrassed yet comforted by the way they read him like a book. The couple showed so much consideration and attentiveness.

“I don’t think you’ll have to worry down in the alleys around the city center. We’ll be able to drink to our hearts’ content, since drinks are cheap and plentiful, and no one will bat an eye if we have a bit too much—though the ladies might not care for the abundant drunks and booze-drenched seats and tables.”

“Dingy sounds fun as well.”

“Oh, you’re up for it? All right! We’ll hop from places that serve drinks mixed with gods-know-what, to dim and dirty dives, to places where only us guys can enter! Doesn’t that sound like fun, *Wolf*?”

“Sure does, Marcello!”

With an unamused look, Irma eyed the two men; she must’ve thought they’d gotten swept up in the moment. “Do excuse my old man, Sir Volf, for he seems to be tempting you with less-than-decent pleasures...”

“Oh, dear wife of mine, have you not heard?” Marcello responded with a straight face. “Showing him the ropes is my duty as his older guy friend!”

The Man-Made Magical Sword: Fourth Attempt— The Lamenting Blade

After dinner, Volf and Marcello more or less handled all of the cleaning in one go. It went without saying that the two men did the dishes, but they really did scrub the walls and floors as well; Dahlia couldn't help but feel guilty that they had taken her so seriously. As Irma was booked for her hairstyling services in the morning, the Nuvolaris reluctantly took their leave as soon as the cleaning was finished.

That left Dahlia and Volf alone in the workshop on the tower's first floor. It had been a while since they'd last had the time to artifice a magical sword together, and so she had already prepared everything in the afternoon.

"Oswald has taught me a few different ways to combine multiple enchantments. I plan to try the most straightforward method," Dahlia explained. "Would it be all right if I enchanted the sword the same way we did previously?"

"Yeah. I hope it works this time."

On the workbench was a disassembled shortsword along with its screws. The lead-gray blade was enchanted with self-sharpening, the guard with a water crystal for self-cleaning, the handle with a wind crystal for haste, the sheath with weight-reduction, and the screws with hardening.

Their first attempt had been foiled by magical interference that caused the parts to repel each other, making them impossible to assemble. They had coated their second attempt with yellow slime to prevent interference, but that had nullified all of its magical abilities.

This time, Dahlia would try using sealsilver to compose all the enchantments together. She retrieved a thin golden bracelet from her pocket. "Oswald lent me this bangle as protection when dealing with enchantments. He said it would prevent confusion and even the effects of poisons and soporifics."

“Is it a thing for magical toolmakers to borrow bracelets from their mentors?”

“No, it isn’t, but he said that uncommon materials have the ability to cause ailments, so it’s for safety’s sake. Oswald told me to keep it until I can craft something like it. He even told Ivano to put it on when going out.”

“Would you mind if I took a look at it?”

“Not at all. There are a bunch of different materials on the inside. The white piece is unicorn horn, black is bicorn horn, red is fire dragon scale, and green is forest snake heart, I believe. They’re all connected by a very fine magical circuit.”

Volf silently listened to her explanation as he examined the bracelet. “Oswald probably meant it as a gift for you,” he said.

“I highly doubt that. It’s such a valuable piece; I thought I might even rent it from him.” As they were chatting, Dahlia took out a box just barely bigger than her hands from one of the cabinets. It was surprisingly heavy as a result of what it contained: liquid sealsilver. The unique metal stayed in its liquid state until magic was applied to it, which then solidified it. Its magic insulation characteristics meant that it was often used for material containers, shields, and the like. “I will be applying a layer of sealsilver where parts join up.”

“Like the stuff they use for magically sealed boxes?”

“Precisely. That’s what it’s well-known for, but sealsilver is used to keep magical tools from losing their power too. I was told it would be possible to prevent the enchantments from opposing each other in our application. It’s not possible to enchant it on top of another enchantment, but we can use it to physically manipulate the sword by applying it to the connecting parts.”

With a glass spoon, Dahlia scooped a small amount of sealsilver from the black box and poured it onto the blade, where it formed a cherry-sized bead that was a shade brighter than quicksilver. She directed magic from her finger and rolled the ball of metal around; it swiftly flattened out over the parts it came in contact with. Now the tang was clad in a thin but solid coat of sealsilver.

“This process doesn’t take much magic, so I’ll just go ahead and coat all the

parts.” She continued on to coat the guard where it connected with the other parts, the inside of the sheath, and the threads on the screws. It was as if she were pushing around a roly-poly, to put it in humorous terms.

“Dahlia, you think that could be a small piece of silver slime?”

“I’m not some sort of monster tamer out of a fairy tale, you know? I’m sure it’s just liquid metal.”

“I suppose that makes sense. You *are* the nemesis of all slimes, after all.”

“That’s rich coming from the ‘Bane of Beasts,’ was it?”

Their banter made the process quite quick, and now it was Volf’s turn to put the sword back together. His swiftness gave off the impression that he was well-experienced. Only when he was tightening the screws back on did he encounter mild repulsion, but it was trivial enough that it did not pose any problems.

“The sheath by itself feels light, so that works for sure. Let me see if I can swing it any faster.” The sword whooshed in a manner that was distinctly odd, and Dahlia shrank back almost without realizing it. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to frighten you. I didn’t think the haste would work *that* well, but at least I can say that it definitely works.”

“How is the cleaning function?”

Volf pressed on the guard and a slight trickle of regular old water streamed out onto the blade before dripping onto the workbench. It didn’t seem to Dahlia that enough water had come out to have any effect, but Volf reassured her that it was more than enough in combination with a rag. He then returned it to the scabbard. “It works perfectly! I didn’t expect we’d find success so soon.”

“All right! Compared to our past attempts, making this magical sword has been remarkably more uneventful.” Ignoring Dahlia’s choice of words, which even she herself thought strange on reflection, this was a definitive success compared to the other three that she’d made so far. At the very least, their newest creation posed no inherent risk to its wielder. It was a meager accomplishment, but the two of them were grinning from ear to ear. “What about a name for it?”

“Hmm, let’s see. It looked like it cried a stream of tears, so how about ‘The Lamenting Blade’?”

“May I ask why the names are always so villainous? You could just call it ‘The Water-Producing Blade’ or something along those lines.”

“Ehh. Some people prefer coffee, some prefer tea.” Some might have called his naming sense edgy and some might have called hers boring, but the fact of the matter was that there was no one good name. “Anyway, could I take this with me back to the barracks?”

“Sure, I don’t mind, but wouldn’t you want a proper one?”

“This is plenty good for what it is. It’s sharp and produces potable water for when I go on expeditions.”

“It would be unnecessarily bulky, don’t you think? You could use a water crystal for that.”

“When I got picked off by that wyvern, I had an emergency water crystal on me too, but the belt holster got cut and I lost it. With this shortsword, I could holster it close to me as my sidearm. It’ll offer some peace of mind.”

“Volf, you speak as though you plan to be picked off by a wyvern again...” Dahlia trailed off as she recalled the day they had first met. She couldn’t bear for him to get so bloodied and riddled with wounds ever again.

But just as she followed that trail of anxious thoughts, Volf spoke up in an unusually low tone. “You’re awfully polite to me, aren’t you?”

“Huh?”

“I was just thinking how differently you speak to Marcello and Irma. If it’s no trouble, I’d like you to speak to me just as casually.”

“Well, um...” Sure, she and Volf were close, but he was still the son of an earl no matter how you sliced it. Dahlia was already accustomed to speaking to him with some respect, so she couldn’t just up and speak to him as she would to Marcello or Irma. “I wouldn’t want to inadvertently speak to you so casually when we’re out in public. Not to mention that I already addressed you as just ‘Volf’ at the castle...”

“Sorry, that was an unreasonable thing to ask. Forget about it.” The corners of his lips curled upwards, but there was a look in those cold golden eyes as though he’d come to understand something.

“No, it’s not that! It’s just... Well, could I ask you to please wait until I get my barony? I think I would be able to be closer with you that way.” Volf looked at her, his eyes slightly wide; Dahlia’s words shocked even herself. “But, uh, you’d still outrank me even then, of course...”

“Well, I’ll just have to become a baron to match you then,” he said without any hesitation, his blooming smile contrasting with her panicked response. “I’ll slay a wyvern all by myself to get my rank soon.”

“Please don’t. I don’t want you to become takeout for it again.”

Her deadpan delivery got a chuckle out of Volf. He was running his fingers along the shortsword; what caught her attention was the way he did it, almost as if he were gently petting a cat. “In any case, it’s pretty amazing that you were able to make a magic sword in such a short time.”

“I couldn’t have done it without Oswald’s advice, and I wouldn’t claim it’s nearly as powerful as a real one. I don’t even know if this technique will work on a full-length sword either. Since my magic isn’t that powerful, you should ask someone with more magic—someone you trust—to test the shortsword out. Oh, and keep my name out of it, please.”

“Say, Dahlia, would you like to work at the castle? I think you’d be able to get your hands on some exceptionally rare materials. If I ask my brother, I’m sure he’d write a recommendation letter for you.”

“Thanks, but no thank you. My magic is not powerful enough, and what I want to make are tools for everyday life.” The promise of rare goods was alluring, but that wasn’t the direction in which she wanted to go. She wanted to make tools for convenience and to bring smiles to the people. Making a sword for Volf was a rare exception to those priorities. “And as Ivano said, if anyone finds out that a woman like me made a pseudo-magical sword, I might even be arrested under the pretext that I’m an aristocrat’s pet toolmaker.”

“Have you forgotten that I, too, am an aristocrat?”

“Erm, no, I have not...”

“I’m kidding! I don’t have any intentions like that as of now.”

“*As of now?!* ” she snapped back to Volf’s hearty laughter. His teasing seemed to be just a bit more mean-spirited, so she changed the topic to protect herself. “Now that it’s so hot out, I presume it’s terrible out in the field.”

“I try to rinse myself off with a water crystal. Sometimes, I’ll even rub myself with ice made from an ice crystal.”

“That sounds truly miserable...”

“Well, it’s not like we can bring chilling fans with us on expeditions. Sometimes we’ll get people who can cast wind magic to circulate the air around, but we can’t ask them to keep it up the whole time either. If it’s hot and humid, then we’re pretty much soaking in our sweat, whether we’re moving around or lying down in our tents. We can’t take off our armor or change shirts out in the field, so sweat rash sneaks up on us if we’re not careful.” That was one thing Dahlia’s socks and soles couldn’t fix. “Still, the cold’s just as bad as the heat.”

“What do you mean?” It was summer—the idea of being cold seemed absolutely foreign.

“Not only do we get drenched in sweat and rain, but we rinse off in water when we get monster blood on us, so it can get chilly even though it’s summer. Us younger members are fine with just a blanket draped over us, but some of the more senior members really have to bundle up.”

“Knights sure have it rough...”

“One of those senior knights had a cold during our last expedition. His sore throat meant that he couldn’t swallow any of the jerky or rye bread in our rations, yet he still refused any treatment.”

“Wouldn’t healing magic take care of his sore throat right away?”

“It would have come back right away regardless since magic would only have relieved his symptoms without curing his cold, which was the root of the problem. He said it’d be a waste of magic anyway and that it should be saved in

case we encountered monsters on our way home.” The hunt was undoubtedly dangerous, but their journey had been no walk in the park either. It was always a possibility that they’d run into danger on their way there or back, so it was wise to have healing magic or potions ready just in case. “That’s why we ought to hurry and adopt the camp stove. Hot food will do us wonders.”

“I hope so, for everyone’s sake.” Combat was a large and dangerous part of their duty, but it sounded as though everything else was unpleasant as well. Dahlia’s stove could alleviate both the wretched meals and the cold, so she hoped to be able to deliver the order to the order soon. She’d thought about subsidizing the stoves out of her own pocket if cost turned out to be an issue for the order, but Ivano would certainly veto that idea. That being the case, the only thing Dahlia could do was find a way to drive the cost down.

“It’s getting late, so I should probably head home,” said Volf, looking out the window. “Oh, drat. It’s just started raining again.”

It was coming down harder by the second and didn’t look as though it would stop.

“Here, take this.” Dahlia lifted a black raincoat off a hook on the wall. The outside was trimmed in sand lizard, while the inside was lined with wyvern skin. It was the very same coat that she’d lent Volf on the day they met.

However, he didn’t seem entirely thrilled by the idea. “I shouldn’t borrow your father’s coat again. You wear it too, don’t you?”

“Please, I insist. I have other raincoats I can wear.”

“But this is a really fine coat, isn’t it? Plus, it’s a memento of your father. Maybe I could borrow a different one?”

Dahlia smiled at Volf before opening a large trunk that lay nearby. “I have a pretty scarlet one, one with blue polka dots, and one with lilies of the valley—which would you like?” she asked in all seriousness, offering him a selection of ladies’ raincoats, designed by Lucia.

A look of surprise crossed Volf’s face, but then he chuckled to himself and reached out with his right hand. “On second thought, I think I’ll borrow your

father's coat again, *Dali.*"

A Friend's Misunderstanding and the Zephyricloth

Dahlia made her third visit to the castle early one afternoon. In this case, the third time proved not to be the charm; she was no more placid than during her previous two visits. Having that said, though, she was slightly less nervous as she was there today only to deliver the quote for the camp stoves and shoe-dryers. Ivano should have been with her as well, but Dahlia had refused his company as he was swamped with work; a large order for the shoe-dryers had arrived seemingly out of nowhere and he had to work on the quotation for that.

Because Volf was in the midst of training, it was Randolph who came to receive Dahlia. However, instead of heading to the reception to deliver the documents, he led her to the third floor. There, behind a set of doors with a silver plaque that read *Order of Beast Hunters, Captain's Office*, Grato and a seasoned knight were waiting. Daunted by the stately furniture, Dahlia timidly delivered the estimation to the captain as the other knight offered her a seat on the sofa. As she took it, a set of tea and sweets arrived. Dahlia prepared herself; perhaps there had been problems with the insoles or the camp stoves—or worse yet, perhaps the captain would bring up the topic of athlete's foot again.

Grato smiled warmly. "Apologies for taking up your precious time. I have prepared black tea and cake as thanks for coming all the way here."

"This is cheesecake from the royal kitchen—the very same enjoyed by the king," explained the veteran knight.

"Oh. Thank you very much." Never had Dahlia thought a single slice of baked cheesecake could be so daunting.

It was slightly bigger than the store-bought variety and there was a certain heftiness to it. The entirety was baked to a vanilla color aside from its top, which had been glazed and caramelized. It was served on a navy-blue plate with a big dollop of fresh whipped cream on the side and a dainty blossom-shaped candy on top. It was nothing short of artful.

Upon being urged a second time to give it a taste, Dahlia was pleasantly

surprised to find that it wasn't as sweet as she'd imagined. The cheese was rather rich and strong, but it was only after it had lingered on the palate for a few moments that its moderate sweetness revealed itself. With her first few bites, Dahlia understood the thickness of the cake—the cheeses and textures in the two layers differed. Having whipped cream with cheesecake was a first for her, but it was no less delicious. The sweetness of the cream served to accentuate the saltiness and savoriness of the cake, creating an entirely different experience.

After the four of them finished their desserts, Dahlia asked the knights about monsters and expeditions. She was fascinated by everything, from uncommon monsters and the tactics for fighting them to traveling and meals during expeditions. She was then asked about magical tools, and they spent much time on the topic. Their conversation and afternoon tea prolonged the meeting, and Dahlia had one too many cups of the delicious black tea.

As Dahlia set off from the castle, Randolph showed his thoughtfulness and directed her to the powder room on the first floor before taking her to the carriages. She should've known better than to drink three whole cups of tea and she kicked herself for it.

She wondered to herself whether all the lavatories in the castle were this big or if it was only because this one was for guests; just one stall was nearly four times as spacious as her whole bathroom at home. Marble slabs covered every surface, looking like they must've hurt the king's coffers; tripping and falling would hurt just as much physically.

Dahlia was tense as she stepped out of her stall, only to suddenly collide with someone. "Sorry!"

"My humble apologies for getting your clothes wet! I am inexperienced in my duties, so I beg for your pardon..." She wore a familiar gray uniform, suggesting that she was one of the attendants in the Beast Hunters' section. As she frantically apologized, she dabbed Dahlia's skirt with a tea towel.

Seeing the maid so anxious and awkward only made Dahlia feel the same. "Of course. Please pay it no mind."

“Thank you for your compassion, and again, I am truly sorry for causing you harm.” The maid performed several deep curtsies before scurrying away. It must’ve been a terribly grave mistake for her.

Dahlia exited the washroom and headed down the hallway to where Randolph was waiting. However, in his place was standing another knight who sported dark blue hair.

“Good day, Chairwoman Rossetti. As Goodwin had to leave to attend to other affairs, I shall be escorting you to the carriage station in his stead,” he said before frowning slightly. “Erm, I’m not too sure if I am being tactless, but there seems to be a splatter of ink on your skirt.”

“Huh? Oh. I appreciate you notifying me of it.” Dahlia tugged on her honeydew-green skirt to find a trail of black ink stretching from the seam to the back. She figured the maid must’ve used a dirty rag earlier. Unfortunately, the light shade of Dahlia’s skirt meant that the stain couldn’t be concealed well.

“Please wait here as I fetch a maid,” the knight said.

It was a maid who’d caused the problem in the first place, but Dahlia didn’t know whether she should mention it or not. Besides, the maid had been plenty apologetic and distraught, so Dahlia didn’t want to give off the impression of throwing her weight around.

After some quick thinking, Dahlia realized she could turn her maxi skirt around and then hide the stain by holding her bag in front of her, so she refused the knight’s offer to summon help and instead chose to go to the powder room to enact her plan. She returned to the hall, saying, “Thank you for your patience. I think I can hold my bag in front of me and hide the blot well enough.”

“Oh, I see! You can just flip your skirt around!” The knight seemed to have one *aha* moment followed closely by another. He averted his blue eyes.

“Apologies for my disrespectful behavior, Chairwoman Rossetti.”

“Not to worry. I am a commoner, after all, so I’d like you to speak comfortably too.”

“If you’re sure, then thank you. We met at the last meeting, but allow me to

introduce myself again. My name is Dorino Barti and I'm a Scarlet Armor like Volf. See, I'm originally from the city center and I'm not very well-versed in manners, so forgive me if I misspeak."

"Please speak freely. I myself live in the West District near the boundary wall."

"Much appreciated."

Dahlia was glad to see him immediately become less tense, but also to hear that he was one of the small handful of people whom Volf considered friends. "If you are with the Scarlet Armors, then you must keep company not just with Volf but with Sir Randolph as well," she said, smiling.

"*Volf? Sir Randolph?*" Dorino didn't seem quite as pleased as she was, though, as he glared at Dahlia with his navy eyes and growled in a low tone. "Both of them, huh? You sure work quick."

She blinked at him, uncomprehending.

"Glad I didn't say anything. Volf probably wouldn't be familiar with your type, but what surprises me is that you got to Randolph too."

"Huh?"

"Volf's gotta keep his wits about him. Didn't think there'd be a broad to wrap him around her little finger like this."

"'Wrap him around my little finger'? Erm, Volf is just a friend..." And Dorino was Volf's friend too. She sensed there was some kind of misunderstanding, but there wasn't any other way to describe her relationship with Volf.

"Look, your products are great and I'm grateful for them. But please, just don't hurt either man." Dorino bowed deeply and walked away before Dahlia could respond.

As they proceeded to the carriage station, passersby in the corridor forced Dahlia to keep quiet, allowing no opportunity for her to clear the air with Dorino before she got into the carriage and set off for home.



The sun began to set while Volf was changing in his personal room at the barracks. Just as he had finished and was about to step out, a knock summoned

him to the door. Randolph, with Dorino behind him, now stood before Volf.

“We’re going out for food and drinks. Care to join, Volf?” asked the shieldsman.

“I’m more than happy to.”

“Shall I ask Kirk?”

“No, he’s gone back to his parents’ today since he has tomorrow off.”

Any other day, it would’ve been Dorino at the door, but now he was standing silently behind Randolph. “Something bothering you, Dorino?”

“No,” he said, but there obviously was. He was kicking his heels into the ground, something he only did when upset.

“All right. Hold on, let me grab my glasses and wallet.” He left his door open as he went to the back of his room. On the wall was the black coat made of sand lizard and wyvern skin—the very one he’d borrowed from Dahlia when a shower had come down all of a sudden.

Dorino saw the coat hanging there and narrowed his blue eyes. “You still have that coat. Hmph. It was a merchant who helped you after the wyvern incident, right? I remember you making a big fuss at the beginning, but you never mentioned it again.”

Volf looked away sheepishly as he stepped out into the corridor. He hadn’t told the rest of the squad who Dali really was. It would be hard to bring it up now, and he really didn’t want to have to explain himself. “Um, so the thing is, Dahlia is actually Dali, the one who saved me in the forest that day.”

“Bullshit. You said the merchant was a man. Chairwoman Rossetti don’t look like no man to me,” Dorino said, raising his voice just a touch.

“Well, think about it. She was in the middle of the forest when a man popped up out of nowhere, so of course she’d be on guard. Part of it is also so that I wouldn’t worry either, I’m sure. Anyway, afterward, I looked everywhere, hoping to get the chance to thank her, and that’s how we hit it off.”

“She gave an unknown man a ride in her carriage, offered you a potion and food, lent you the coat, pretended to be a man so you’d be more comfortable,

and then left without telling you how to reach her again? Oh! How manly!”

“Randolph, ‘manly’ isn’t really a good choice here. You use it to describe—y’know—men,” responded Volf.

Because Randolph’s mother was originally from a neighboring nation and because he had studied in his homeland for many years, he was likely more familiar with that language. This was evident in his odd choice of words and expressions from time to time.

“I see. ‘How womanly,’ then?”

“No, that doesn’t really work either. ‘Cool,’ maybe? Hmm. What’s the opposite of ‘mannish’—‘womanish’? That doesn’t quite mean the same thing either... What *is* the right word here?”

Volf and Randolph racked their brains to no avail; in this case, two heads didn’t seem much better than one. Instead, they opted to try Randolph’s native tongue.

It was then that the silent Dorino suddenly turned very pale, smacked both palms against his cheeks, and hunched over. “Oh, gods... I’m the absolute worst!”

The two other knights called out to their friend at the same time.

“What now, Dorino?”

“Dorino, what’s wrong?”

“I did something truly stupid with the chairwoman earlier. I’ve got some apologizing to do...”

“What kind of stupid, exactly?” Volf demanded.

“I...said something horribly off the mark because of my own misunderstanding.”

Volf stepped up to Dorino, practically breathing on him. He felt his pulse pounding in his head, though he couldn’t understand why. “Dorino, why don’t you tell me what exactly it was that you said?”

“I know I erred! I’ll send out an apology letter right away! The next time we

meet, I'll grovel at her feet!"

"What. Did you say. To Dahlia." Unbeknownst to himself, Volf was tapping all the icy intimidation he had in him.

Dorino froze up and had to muster all of himself to get his words out. "I said that she's a broad who's got you wrapped around her finger because you aren't careful enough."

In a split second, Volf grabbed him by his neck with his left hand, lifting him up and pinning him against the wall if he weighed no more than a feather. Why would Dorino say such a thing to Dahlia? Why would his own friend say such a thing to anyone? Volf's shock and fury drove away any words he might've had.

"Volf! Hey!" Randolph barked from behind. Volf tried to gently brush him away, but the force of his right hand was enough to slam the knight against the opposite wall.

"Volf... I...fucked up... I'll...say sorry..." Dorino choked out his words before the crushing grip suddenly released him. He slumped to the floor and gasped for air.

Volf turned around to see Randolph still on the ground. He stared at his left hand as he calmed himself down. "I'm sorry, Dorino. I blew my lid."

"I'm the one who was in the wrong; I should be the one saying sorry."

"And apologies to you too, Randolph. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. No need to fret."

As the three of them awkwardly tried to reconcile, others who had been nearby came to investigate what the noise was about. Dorino fibbed, saying that they'd been fooling around and had a tumble.

"Dorino, let's go and apologize," Volf suggested.

"Like, *now*? Wouldn't it be rude to visit at this hour?"

"I'd like for us to go now, else Dahlia will dwell on it."

"Okay. Then please take me there and mediate for us," said Dorino, bowing deeply once again.



With hurried horses, their carriage sped to the Green Tower as the sun was still setting. Volf touched the front gate, which swung open, before going up to the door to ring the bell. Familiar footsteps descended the stairs, then the door opened.

Given that she still had her apron on, Dahlia must've been preparing dinner. "Hello, Volf. Is something the matter?"

"Sorry to drop in on you uninvited. I was, um, hoping that you would allow Dorino to apologize for today. Oh, and Randolph tagged along too, if that's no trouble."

Volf had never flown into a fit of rage against another human being, not since the attack on his family's coach back when he was still a child. He reflected upon how he'd acted at the barracks and was worried about his own reaction to Dorino's apology, so he'd asked Randolph to come along as support even though Volf had sent him crashing into a wall too. Volf promised himself to stay calm no matter what was to happen.

"We're a little conspicuous standing out here like this, so why don't you all come inside?"

"Are you sure it's okay to go in the tower? I wouldn't mind if we just stayed in the backyard. And are you sure you want to speak to Dorino?"

"You're here, Volf. I'm not worried."

Her words and her smile caused a creaking sensation deep down in his chest; Volf worried that she was forcing herself to smile and be pleasant about Dorino. He invited the two other knights at the gate to come into the workshop on the first floor.

Immediately after entering her home, Dorino faced Dahlia and dropped to his left knee. "Chairwoman Rossetti, I said dreadful things to you because of my own misunderstanding. I would like to recant my words and apologize to you. I'm terribly sorry!" He bowed his head down low and stayed there motionless. Combined with kneeling on one knee, it was an extreme form of apology and something that was hardly ever done.

“Oh, um, please rise, Sir Barti!” Dahlia responded in a fluster, seemingly rattled by his gesture.

“Dorino, do tell what caused you to misunderstand,” inquired Volf.

He hesitated for a moment. “Well, she called not just you but also Randolph by your given names, and she smiled at me. She also seemed awfully close with you, Volf, so I thought she was the company’s honeyfuggle.”

“‘Honeyfuggle’? What does that mean?”

“To get preferential treatment and pricing, some companies might employ women to make a weapon of their feminine wiles and pursue false relationships. It happens in the castle more often than you might expect. And of course, honeyfuggles can be men too.”

“Wait, let’s go back a bit, Dorino. You said Dahlia smiled at you and seemed close with me? That’s it?”

“Well, no. I said that I was a commoner from the city center and Chairwoman Rossetti gave me a big smile. A young woman meeting me for the first time and smiling like that has gotta be a honeyfuggle...or so I thought,” he said with a dejected sigh.

Volf crooked his neck. “Come on. People stop you as you walk by to introduce themselves to you. Sometimes, you even get love letters from the maids too, don’t you?”

“Yeah, they come up to me, but only to try to get me to introduce you to them. And the letters are always addressed to either you or Randolph, so I tell them to hand them over personally and walk away.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Of course you wouldn’t. If I’d told you, it’d become nothing but a cause of concern for you. Either that or it’d just piss you off.”

There was apparently a lot that Volf didn’t know about, but he chose to ignore that for now and continue with his questioning. “Anyway, how could Dahlia possibly be a honeyfuggle?”

“You never know about this kinda stuff. No matter how proper or upper-class

someone seems, they could still be after something. Remember that time when a senior knight in our squad got discharged because of something like this? Hell, to tell you the truth, I even got snared when I first joined the order. That's why it hits a nerve."

"There's a personal aspect to it, then," remarked Randolph, who had been silent until now. "Listen, Dorino. Seeing how there are so many Goodwins at the castle and only because she is Volf's friend, I asked Miss Dahlia to address me as Randolph."

"Hey, it took two months before you let me call you by your first name. You can't blame me for raising an eyebrow at you doing the same for Chairwoman Rossetti after only having met her a couple of times."

"I didn't talk to many people when I first joined the Order of Beast Hunters because I was self-conscious about my accent. I still am, but at least I know how to make conversation now."

"Oh..."

Randolph had grown up speaking the languages of both this kingdom and the neighboring nation. Even Volf had mistaken Randolph for the taciturn type.

With the questioning complete, the men didn't have too much else to say and so their gaze naturally fell upon Dahlia.

"Okay, I understand now. So, do I say 'I accept your apology, Sir Barti'?" she asked.

"It doesn't really matter how you say it. But I truly am sorry! I didn't even know that you were the one who had saved Volf until today."

"Volf, you didn't tell them about that day in the forest, did you?"

Before he could respond, the other two knights emphatically nodded in the affirmative.

"Oh, he did. For days, he was sighing about it in the mess hall."

"Aye, I remember too. He was so desperate to find the person who'd saved his life."

"Gentlemen, I ask that you say no more." Volf held out one hand, halting

them. He couldn't let Dahlia know just how pathetic he had been at the time.

"Erm, may I have a word with you, Volf?" Dahlia whispered.

He leaned in closer. "What is it?"

"Originally, Irma and her mother were coming for dinner, but a messenger came earlier saying that Irma's mother has caught a cold and is now laid up in bed. Irma caught her cold too. I was scratching my head about what to do with all the food I had prepared now that they can't come. I know it isn't much to serve to guests, but I was hoping you three could do me the favor of joining me for dinner."

"Honestly? I don't think they should."

"Oh. You're right. You are always so considerate of me, Volf, but it would be tremendously boorish of me to ask three royal knights to clean up for me. Of course there would be no way. Silly me..."

"No! That's not what I meant..." He glanced over to the other two. While Dorino looked down in the dumps, Randolph looked rather awkward—which was rare. "I just don't want to cause you any more mental anguish and, not to mention, the bother with all the cooking."

"It's true that I was rather shocked at what he said and I had been anxiously revisiting the scenario in my head. But not only did he apologize with all his heart, I heard his explanation too, so I'm all better now. Besides, Sir Barti was just worried for you two, you know?"

"What do you mean?"

"Sir Barti pleaded with me not to hurt you two before bowing to me, so there I was wondering if I had done something wrong."

"Chairwoman Rossetti, I..." Dorino must've felt really hot from embarrassment; he was scratching the back of his head. "No, that was just me making a big mistake. I jumped to the wrong conclusion. I'm sorry. I'm such a fool..."

"Why did you say that, Dorino?" Volf queried.

"Volf, is it not obvious that it was because he cares deeply for you and Sir

Randolph? Sir Barti had nothing to gain for himself by saying something like that.” It was rare for Dahlia to interrupt a conversation. Dorino stared wide-eyed at her.

“To save Miss Dahlia’s honor, shall we put an end to this—‘kerfuffle’? Is that the right word?—anyway, let us conclude it here.” Randolph offered peace between the parties, to which Dahlia nodded with a smile. The other two, too, finally looked like they could breathe again.

The knights accepted her offer and followed her lead into the tower. When they got to the stairs leading to the second floor, Dahlia stopped in her tracks. “That reminds me of something my father said once. ‘Apologies and a drink together mend problems between men,’ he said. I wonder how true it is.”

“Up to a point, yeah. What about fights between women?” said Volf.

“They’d just profusely apologize, no? That, or never speak to you again.”

“While I was in the kitchen,” said Dahlia, “my father would say to his drinking friends, ‘Women let problems sit and brew; when you forget, they’ll throw it at you.’ What a terrible thing to say, though.”

“A grudge, huh?” Volf grimaced.

“I wouldn’t want that to happen to me...” muttered Dorino.

“You said it,” agreed Randolph.

The three men averted their gazes and stared holes into the walls.

“Talk things out and there would be no fear of squabbling.” Dahlia turned around with a smile, looking for a moment as though she were old and wise.



After Dahlia led her impromptu guests to their seats, the three men couldn’t peel their eyes away from the food already on the table.

“Sorry about how childish the arrangement is...” Dahlia said in a slightly quieter-than-usual voice.

“Holy moly, the roses are made of ham...” commented Dorino.

“The radishes have been turned into beautiful flowers too...” remarked

Randolph.

Dahlia had played around with the food and plating for the ladies' night she had planned—not that it was anything spectacular, just some flowers made of ham and radishes with leaves made of cucumber.

“And the wieners...are monster-shaped?”

The problem lay in the wieners that Dahlia had stocked up on while there was a sale at the butcher's. She'd gotten carried away with the nostalgia for her past life; she had cut the sausages with eight tentacles and even stood them up on each plate. Dahlia couldn't blame the knights for thinking of them as monsters.

“Well, actually, I was going for octopuses, but... Never mind.” It wasn't enough food for three hungry men, so she decided to cut up some of the ham and cheese that Volf had given her previously. “Please help yourself to the snacks as I get the food and drinks ready.”

“I'll lend a hand,” said Volf.

“Thank you. Could I have you slice the ham and cheese, then?”

“Um, how about us? Is there anything we could help with?”

“Can you set the table, Dorino? I'll get you the missing set of cutlery.”

“Sure thing.”

Volf was almost like a member of the household by now, so it felt entirely natural to Dahlia. As they entered the kitchen, she flicked on the magical stove.

“Irma's your childhood friend, right? Does her mother still live nearby?” asked Volf as he sawed the cheese with a serrated knife.

“They moved out to the Central District for her husband's work, so it's been a long time since we've met up.”

“Sorry about showing up unannounced; I should've sent a messenger. It would've been very awkward if we had shown up while they were over.”

“All's well that ends well.” Dahlia turned on the oven as well to reheat the food inside. She then checked the temperature of the pot of oil and took the other ingredients out of the refrigerator.

“Are those bigarade prawns?”

“That’s correct. Apparently, they had a good haul of them, so the fishmonger came peddling.” Bigarade prawns were enormous and therefore easy to cook with for Dahlia’s purposes; they were the standard prawns in this kingdom as well. They were also known as peasant prawns; they were affordable because they tended to have a muddy flavor. However, that wasn’t a problem as long as they were purged with clean water for about a day and cooked at a high temperature. “I’m planning to bread and fry them. That still isn’t enough to feed everyone, so I’ll find something after our toast.”

She was glad she’d bought ten of the larger specimens from the fishmonger. She hadn’t intended on cooking them all tonight but was instead going to save a few for when Volf came next time, though she knew better than to be too honest.

“Since you know everyone’s tastes, could I have you choose our libation after you finish cutting the ham and cheese?”

“Sorry, Dahlia, I’ll make sure to make up for today.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong, and...” She paused before continuing. “Don’t criticize Sir Barti anymore, please. For me. Promise me that this won’t become a sore spot between the two of you.”

“Okay, I promise not to get into a fight with him...” He looked and sounded as if he felt a little sorry—as if he had been planning to chastise Dorino afterward but had just reconsidered. Dahlia was glad she’d brought it up. “What’s in that pot? It smells so good.”

“It smells good, but I’m not sure if it will taste good. It’s bigarade prawn bisque, but it isn’t a proper one like you would find in a restaurant.” The word “bisque” made it sound cool, but it was a combination of stock made from the prawn shells, minced vegetable scraps, tomato, and an unmeasured splash of heavy cream. Dahlia figured that after a day of training, the knights must want something a little heartier, so she made sure to add enough salt and butter. With everything ready, she shuttled the soup and fried prawns out of the kitchen.

When they returned to the dining room, Dahlia placed the dishes in front of the knights. Dorino was on the edge of his seat, in contrast with Randolph, who sat there calm and expressionless.

“A toast, then, Dahlia?”

“Um, for the safety of the Order of Beast Hunters and a fortuitous tomorrow for all—cheers.”

“For good fortune—cheers,” said two of the knights.

“To the benevolence of Chairwoman Rossetti—cheers,” said the other, though everyone else refrained from touching upon the incident.

As Dahlia sipped the medium-dry red wine, the rest of the table clamored about something else.

“That’s so good...”

“Mm! I was expecting tomato soup, but it’s prawn!”

It seemed that the soup was to Volf’s taste as well as Dorino’s, which was a relief to Dahlia. However, there Randolph was, expression ever unchanging as he gracefully sipped his soup. She prayed that he was not comparing her faux bisque to a proper one.

“What’s this? Asparagus?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

In a large shared platter was bacon-wrapped asparagus, roasted till the ends were charred. Dahlia had cracked black pepper over it after it was plated, so its pungency and aroma wafted through the room. For Dorino, though, the dish proved to be a bit of a challenge.

“If it’s difficult to cut through with a knife, Sir Barti, please feel free to just use your fork.”

“It wouldn’t be too impolite?”

“Not at all. We do away with table manners here at the tower. My father even used his hands to eat it.”

“Wasn’t your father a baron?”

“Yes, but he was born into a common family and, as such, his etiquette was far from good. Like father, like daughter too.”

“I’m thankful that I get to drop pretenses when I’m over,” Volf added as he munched on the asparagus skewered on his fork. Dorino, reassured, followed suit.

On the other hand, Randolph continued to eat in silence. Volf had offered to refill his glass with more wine but was refused.

“Whoa. We’ve got fancy seafood tonight...” Dorino muttered in amazement.

“This is but ordinary bigarade prawn, I assure you.”

On each of their personal plates were two large fried prawns, served on leafy greens with a side of tartar sauce. Biting into a still-scalding piece revealed a rich and tender prawn inside the breading. It was even better with a good dunking in tartar sauce—calories be damned.

“No. No way. You ain’t no peasant prawn; you’ve gotta be some kind of fancy-schmancy prawn,” Dorino accused his half-eaten piece of food. Dahlia left him be and instead concentrated on her own meal.

After finishing her fried prawns, Dahlia went back to the kitchen. She had a pot of water boiling away, to which she added some pasta for aglio olio e peperoncino—something simple and quick to prepare. She went heavy on the salt, chilis, and garlic.

It was delightful watching Volf and Dorino inhaling their food, and after clearing their seconds, they looked as satisfied as could be. Again, Randolph was the odd man out, declining a refill of both wine and pasta; he even switched to drinking plain water. Dahlia felt apologetic; her cooking was indeed too lowbrow for the likes of him.

“I have made dessert as well. Would anyone care for some bread and butter pudding?”

“Sorry, Dahlia, I’m stuffed to the gills.”

“Ditto. I got too greedy.”

“Erm, if it wouldn’t be too much trouble,” said Randolph. He was likely being

considerate, thus his reserved response.

She hurried to the kitchen to reheat the dessert and came out with a portion of hot bread and butter pudding in a ceramic vessel, then placed it on top of a wooden trivet in front of the knight. Dahlia was anxious that it would be yet another hardship for him and wanted to tell him to not force himself, but she decided not to.

After thanking her, Randolph dug in, taking a quarter of the portion in each bite; his eyes drooped slightly as he did so. Given his large frame, the spoon in his hand looked miniature. However, he seemed to be savoring every mouthful. Perhaps he had a bit of a sweet tooth and liked his desserts better than drink, Dahlia surmised.

“If it’s to your liking, Sir Randolph, there is still another piece.”

“Oh, I—no, I would appreciate it.” He almost looked like a shy schoolboy when he hesitated for a moment there.

Dahlia decided to add more honey to his second portion and even brought a side of honey for him to drizzle as he liked. Randolph, in fact, added it all and devoured the whole thing. She was glad there was at least one thing that suited his palate.

Just as she was feeling the wave of solace wash over her, Randolph took the bottle of red wine in his hand. “Miss Dahlia, thank you for the delicious meal. Everything was wonderful. Allow me to serve you a glass of wine as a token of my appreciation.”

“Oh, uh, thank you very much.” Dahlia was taken by surprise at his gesture, while Volf peered at her from her side. She wondered if, in noble circles, pouring wine for someone of a lower social standing signified gratitude. She could’ve sworn she’d read about it in the book of proprieties, but she couldn’t recall it off the top of her head.

“Please, no need to stand. ‘Do away with manners at the tower,’ you said.” Randolph stopped her and instead stood up himself.

Dahlia met him halfway with her glass. The medium-dry wine tasted more like a medium-sweet today.



“Now that we’re full of wine and food, why don’t we get to know each other by playing the confession game?” declared Dorino.

“Are we playing it here?”

“Oh, you know of it already, Chairwoman Rossetti? That makes it so much easier!” He grinned like a scamp and his blue eyes narrowed.

“That’s what we knights do when we’re in our own company, but Dahlia here is a lady,” Volf rebuffed him.

“No, it’ll be fine. Let’s do it! I’ll go first. When I first met Volf, I thought he was a total scoundrel.” Dorino’s path of self-destruction almost made Dahlia choke on her wine. Eventually, she managed to set her glass down. “He was so stiff when he introduced himself, and he always had an obviously fake smile on his face, he’d reject letters from girls without even so much as touching them, he’d interrupt girls who would confess their love, he’d make them cry and walk away—who’d a thunk he was really like this?”

“Pray tell what you mean by ‘like this,’” Volf asked, pulling a smile. “And this is the third time you’ve used this so-called confession.”

“Hey, I gotta drive home the point, don’t I? It’s not like I’ve got any other juicy secrets to interest Chairwoman Rossetti, and you *know* I can’t tell her anything else about me.”

“You’ve got a point there. That’s nothing you should mention in front of any woman.”

“Or maybe I should tell her all about your history with the ladies. The top three most shocking? How about the top three most shameless?”

“Gods, you’re going to spoil my drink!” As Volf roared, he dropped the bite of salad he was about to put into his mouth. He picked up the dropped flower-cut radish, but the mayonnaise had already splattered on his hand and sleeves. The worried look on his face seemed to have less to do with the embarrassing topic at hand and more to do with the risk that the mayonnaise on his sleeve might splatter onto the floor.

“Volf, would you like me to get the stain out for you?”

“I’m fine, thanks. I’ll be borrowing your washroom.” He swiftly left the table with somewhat of a grimace.

“Even though I came to apologize, I ended up being treated to such a wonderful dinner. Thank you, Chairwoman Rossetti. I know it won’t make up for everything I’ve done, but I’m more than happy to answer any concerns about Volf that you might have.”

“Thank you for the offer. If I have any concerns, I’ll ask Volf myself.” She understood Dorino was trying to be considerate, but she knew she could get answers straight from the horse’s mouth. Anyway, she knew firsthand about the many rumors and falsehoods that swarmed around Volf.

“All right. Then let’s spill some more secrets while he’s gone!”

Randolph looked unconvinced. “I’m not sure about that...”

“Um, I don’t want you to reveal anything that would upset Volf either,” she refused immediately, though it didn’t seem to have any effect.

Dorino chugged the remainder of his glass of wine and continued. “Let’s see what legends I can dig up... Sometime last year, there was a rumor about how Volf brought a gal back to the barracks, but nothing could be further from the truth. She actually snuck through his window and into his room in the middle of the night. And his room is on the *third* floor.”

“Very determined, I see.” There were many classic stories of a man shouting words of love from outside a woman’s bedroom window, but Dahlia had never heard of the reverse until now. To climb up to his balcony on the third floor must’ve required some planning—or at least a very tall ladder.

“Good thing Volf was in his room at the time, and thank goodness the gal didn’t slip and fall. After the incident, the tree she’d used was cut down. The only other damage was that I got the wits scared out of me as I was opening the window in my room, which was next door.”

“I empathize.” How horrifying it must have been to find a stranger clambering up to your window in the middle of the night. If that were to happen to Dahlia here, she’d definitely scream at the top of her lungs and pelt the intruder with magic crystals of the kind used for self-defense against monsters.

Randolph muttered, “Still feels weird to do the confession game *because* our friend isn’t present, but...”

“You say that, but you’re joining in too!” quipped Dorino, but Randolph gave away no clues as to how he took it.

The shieldsman leaned both elbows onto the table and faced Dahlia. “It may reach you soon too, but there’s a rumor that Volf and a newer knight named Kirk are getting rather intimate. Astorga dismissed those claims, though.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Kirk’s been following Volf everywhere lately. Astorga—he’s our senior, by the way—was fighting the bicorn together with Volf, but people seem to have mistaken him for Kirk as well,” Dorino mumbled. But the trouble was not that he was mumbling; Dahlia couldn’t follow his meaning.

“Sorry for getting you mixed up in our affairs. Kirk’s a good person and a good friend. He seems to have much respect and fondness for Volf, so Volf has been helping him train and otherwise taking care of him,” Randolph explained.

“It’s a good thing to have good friends,” Dahlia responded. She knew that Volf was under the lens of public scrutiny no matter what he did, and he wouldn’t deliberately put an end to a small harmless rumor like this one.

Dorino tried to reassure her. “Chairwoman Rossetti, I guarantee that Volf prefers the company of women—I mean, not that my guarantee means much.”

“Uh, I don’t judge. As long as people are good for each other, I have no qualms about it.” Though it wasn’t as common, there were no laws in this kingdom against relationships or marriages between people, regardless of sex. Besides, who was she to deny Volf love? The conversation suddenly turned silent, and the next thing she knew, Randolph was staring at her with his auburn eyes.

“I see,” he said. “This must be what they call in Ordine the confidence of the primary partner.”

“Wha—”

“Randolph, *no*. Please shut up. I’ll get Volf to explain things in your language,” Dorino said, smacking his own forehead before he turned to Dahlia. “Sorry for that, Chairwoman Rossetti. He hasn’t quite adapted to our culture, and I’m

guessing there are some words he's still having trouble with."

The very notion that she was Volf's primary partner made no sense; she wasn't in that kind of relationship with *anybody*. Dahlia didn't speak Randolph's native tongue so she wouldn't know where to begin explaining it to him in words he'd understand. "There's no need to apologize. Also, it doesn't quite sit right with me to be addressed as 'chairwoman.'"

"In that case, call me Dorino without my title. Is it all right if I call you Ms. Dahlia, then?"

"Oh. Yes, that would be fine." Dahlia hadn't expected him to drop her title *and* use her first name, but it was too late to change her mind. Given the troublesome start of their friendship, and with him being Volf's confidant as well, she didn't wish to rock the boat.

"Thanks. I hate to pick at scabs, but I truly am sorry for what I've said and done today. It's just that, well, to me, Volf is like a stray dog that has just found a home for life."

"Volf? A stray dog?"

"I don't mean anything bad by that. But, you see, he used to be quite the lone wolf. He never used to talk about himself or tell anyone if he'd been injured out in the field. I remember one time finding out that the doctors back in the castle gave him all kinds of grief because he got hurt while defending me. It took, what, three years before we could chat like this? So I guess I was protective of him in the wrong way. Again, I apologize."

Three years. Those two words weighed upon her. Dahlia's relationship with Volf was one between friends, but it was hardly as old a bond as his relationship with these two knights. Dorino had been Volf's squadmate and friend for a long time, so it was more than understandable that he'd be wary of her seemingly popping up out of nowhere and into his life.

"You have apologized more than enough, and it no longer bothers me."

"That's very gracious of you to say," Dorino thanked her. "Oh, that's right. Did you manage to get that stain out of your skirt?"

"Erm, actually, I dyed it."

“Dyed it? All by yourself?”

“That’s right. I had some dark green dye on hand, and it turned out marvelously.” After she’d returned home from the castle, Dahlia had tried as she might to remove the ink spot, but it had been to no avail. At the same time, Dorino’s words had also been bothering her. Her frustration had gotten the better of her and she’d dyed the whole skirt with a dye for magical tools. It was a moss-derived colorfast dye from the Eastern Kingdom called smaragdus, and its rich green made for a great color. Her skirt was still drying in the shade, and Dahlia secretly couldn’t wait to try it on.

“Was your seat covered in ink or something?”

“Um...” She wasn’t sure how much she should disclose. “To tell the truth, I bumped into a maid and she accidentally got some water on my skirt. She may have inadvertently used a dirty rag to dry it off.”

The knights’ expressions instantly soured. Dorino replied, “Please accept my apology on behalf of the Order of Beast Hunters. If you have an idea of what this maid looked like, let us know right away. We’ll talk this over with our captain and deal with it internally. Of course, we’ll pay you back for the damages incurred. And, uh, there’s a nonzero chance that this might have something to do with Volf...”

“Thank you very much for your kindness. However, I can’t distinctly remember what she looked like, so I’m happy just to drop the matter.” Truthfully, Dahlia could remember little else but her brown hair and maid uniform, which were unlikely to filter out many people.

“We shall line up all the maids for you to examine, then. It will show on their faces if we bring along a knight who can use the intimidation skill. To commit such an offense against a chairperson visiting the castle should be grounds for a pay cut at the very least, if not outright dismissal.” Randolph did not soften his words, and his icy tone frankly made Dahlia squirm a little.

“Again, thank you very much for being so considerate of me. It was just an accident, and I’m sure she will have learned from the experience.”

As Dahlia finished her sentence, Volf came back to the table, causing Dorino to abruptly shift topics. “All right, let’s save the confession game for next time.

Oh, I'm sure you've heard from everyone already, but thank you again for the insoles. They're an absolute peach."

Dahlia didn't miss a beat. "I'm very happy to hear that the insoles have been so well-received."

"I wish there was a shirt version, though. It really sucks to have a wet shirt clinging to you when you're out in the summer."

"Try wearing heavy armor like I do. When I get covered in sweat rash, I sorely understand why that one guy got frostbite from an ice crystal."

"I get so itchy underneath my gear, but there's no way to scratch."

The life drained from the knights' eyes as they moaned about their shared issue. It sounded like a severe problem, but it didn't seem to Dahlia that she could easily solve it with a piece of clothing. Suddenly, she became distant as she was reminded of a past failed experiment. "It would be ideal to have clothing that cools its wearer. I've tried to make something like that in the past, but it turned out a little odd, to say the least..."

"Don't tell me it crept as well."

"It most certainly did not! Just what are you thinking about, Volf?"

"Just the first thing that popped into my mind," he said, stifling a laugh as he recalled the Creeping Blade.

"'Crept'? Like a slime? In any case, what did you mean by it being odd? Does wearing it make you warm or something?" Dorino asked.

"It, um, isn't very comfortable to wear."

"Like stiff and scratchy, then? I mean, if that's it, then I could deal with it."

"Err, well... Give me a moment. I should have some leftover material in the kitchen." Better to show them firsthand than to explain it in words. From a cabinet in the kitchen, Dahlia retrieved a long scrap of cloth. She had been meaning to repurpose it into rags, but it was still uncut and looked like a light green scarf.

"Is that not just a piece of cloth?"

“Try wrapping it around your neck.”

Volf eyed it with suspicion but did as instructed. Apparently its effect wasn't obvious at first touch. “Hnnngk. I see...” Volf removed the fabric and rubbed his neck. As Dorino was sipping his wine, Volf handed it off to Randolph.

“Grk!” Randolph's face promptly contorted when he put it on. His shoulders trembled as he tried to bear with it, but he soon stripped it off of his body. He hung his head and held out the fabric in one hand for Dorino to try.

“What? What's the matter with you two?” Dorino seemed dubious as he, too, wrapped it around his neck and even tied it into a bow at the front for whatever baffling reason. “Hm? Heh. Bah ha ha ha! I can't! This tickles too bad!” By the time he finally undid the scarf, tears were pooling in his eyes.

It was cloth that had previously been enchanted with green slime. However, it expelled air that made it squirm and shift, with the result that the wearer felt something like bugs crawling all over their skin. Perhaps Dorino was extra ticklish, but nevertheless, it was an impossibility to wear it for any length of time. Dahlia had tried to turn down the strength of the wind, but it did little to eliminate the discomfort.

“Why does that happen, though? Your insoles don't tickle my feet when I have them on.”

“Part of it is because the insoles are thicker and thus much less flexible. Another reason is that they can't move around with a person's weight on top,” she explained.

A few summers ago, Dahlia had wanted to enchant a shirt. She had been so sure the end product would be nice and breezy, but her hypothesis had turned out to be a little shortsighted. Instead of a narrow strip of cloth like what Volf and the others had tried on, what she had created was a crew neck tee that was enchanted even more strongly with air magic.

She had explained to her father that she'd meant to create an airy and breathable shirt, and no sooner had she excused herself to go to the bathroom than he'd tried it on. Dahlia couldn't help Carlo—he was rolling on the floor howling in laughter—and instead had to drastically tear the shirt off his back.

It would've been a happy ending had the story ended here, but alas, Tobias returned home just then, having visited a client. He could but blink blankly seeing the shirt in tatters in her hands and her father crumpled up on the floor teary-eyed. To explain the situation, Carlo had her craft an identical shirt for Tobias to try on, which her father then had to rip off of Tobias's body in a similar fashion. Tobias, who had been laughing so hard that he lost the strength to stand, chastised Dahlia for not thinking enough before acting. The experiment left multiple victims and a bitter taste in her mouth, and she would sooner have shelved the memory.

Dorino interrupted Dahlia feeling sorry for herself and shocked her with what he had to say. "It might make for a good punishment, though."

"What do you mean?"

"It'd be a hoot at parties and dinners. You know how you always try to get everybody drinking? Well, we'd usually punish whoever can't or doesn't drink by, say, getting them to sing in front of everyone or to shout their crush's name aloud. And if someone's out cold already, we'd prank them by rolling them up tight in a blanket or a battle flag."

"Hell, I remember waking up in a trawl."

"That's just because a banner isn't big enough for you, Randolph." It was too scary to contemplate whether Randolph was a mean drunk or a sleepy drunk, but he'd make for a big catch were he ensnared in a fishing net.

"Wait. Hm. Fabric? Net? Oh!" Something sparked in Dahlia's mind and she raced back to the kitchen. This time, she returned with new cheesecloth that she had in her pantry; she usually used it for straining soups and stocks. "Sorry, everyone! I'm just going to go down to my workshop for a moment. I'll be back before long."

"Oh, an experiment? I'll tag along." And so Volf and Dahlia went down the stairs together.

Down in her workshop, Dahlia dissolved some powdered green slime in a glass beaker. She channeled magic from the tip of her finger and into the solution, turning the liquid into green goop.

Dahlia then used her index finger to control the magic and enchant the cheesecloth with the pale green mixture. However, instead of covering the front and back evenly, she decided to apply the magic in a lattice on both sides and set the air to blow one way. The goop, following the magic from her finger, ran in straight lines vertically and horizontally and affixed itself to the fabric. Throughout the process, she made sure to avoid making the air magic from the green slime overpowering.

It wasn't as though the swatch of cheesecloth was particularly big, but she managed to complete the process more quickly than she had so many years ago. Perhaps her magic had increased since. After Dahlia poked at the enchantment with her left hand to make sure it was bonded correctly, she mentally prepared herself and wrapped it around her neck.

With the fabric looped around her neck once, a gentle and very pleasing breeze vented air from her and out into the ambient air. Though the scarf clung to her skin, it was still very comfortable, as was ensured by the gauze-like texture of the cloth and the crosshatched pattern of the enchantment. In addition, the wind didn't tickle one bit thanks to the exhaust airflow. It seemed as though there would be no problem wearing clothing or armor atop it, and it would be great to wick and dry particularly sweaty parts of the body.

"I think this will keep you cool!" exclaimed the inventor. Dahlia undid the strip of cloth around her neck and passed it to Volf, who then put it on in an identical fashion.

His eyes opened up like deep pools of glimmering gold and a dazzling smile beamed from his face. "It's so nice and breezy! And it doesn't tickle at all!"

When Dorino and Randolph came down as well, each had his turn—and a similar reaction.

"Oh, this is fantastic!" said Dorino.

"Cool," Randolph remarked.

"In that case, I think the strength is just about right," Dahlia commented to herself as she scribbled down some notes.

The knights applied the enchanted cheesecloth to different parts of their

bodies and offered some candid comments.

“I think this could keep me dry in the summer if I slip it between my back and my uniform.”

“Aye, that’s brilliant. It would be great on the underarm too.”

“Someone wearing heavy armor might want a patch on both the chest and back.”

“Heavy armor...” Dahlia took a moment to think. “How about sticking some onto the insides of your armor plates?”

“That would be possible. Most of us add some fabric or cushioning to prevent chafing already.”

“In that case, I may have to make some modifications. Set the wind to be unidirectional but also make it more powerful.” Different users would have different levels of ticklishness, so it might help to make patterns with different wind strengths. Dahlia jotted that down in her notes as well.

“Sticking it to the underside of a helmet might help with preventing sweat from getting into eyes.”

“If the helmet is enchanted, then there might be a risk that the magic would conflict...” Dahlia mulled to herself. “Oh, but what if I fashion it into a thin cap? That way, they could easily be changed out when needed.” Items enchanted with green slime were typically single-use as they were simple to produce, but that would unfortunately make the product disposable, much like the drying insoles.

“I think we’d appreciate that. After we’re done with one, we can strip the enchantment off and reuse it on a new cap. It should take but a flash for palace mages and magical toolmakers.”

“How impressive. The average toolmaker would require some time and likely charge you too,” Dahlia said. Disenchanting a tool supposedly required a fair share of magic, but obviously, there were only top-tier mages and toolmakers at the castle.

“Slapping some onto the insides of gloves might help with sweaty hands too.”

“Oh, the archers would love that.”

With alcohol running through their systems, the knights were giddy about Dahlia’s new invention and discussed the various ways they’d like to use it. With their help, she quickly filled pages of notes, which was as exciting for her as it was for them. There were so many ways to use the fabric that she’d never even imagined. She said with a giggle, “This is so inspiring. I’ll start tinkering on the easy ones first!”

“Hold it, Dahlia!” In contrast with her sunny smile, Volf was unexpectedly grim. “You should discuss this with Ivano first.”

She tilted her head quizzically. “I will, of course, but what’s the matter?”

“Sorry, you two, but give your word that you’ll not mention this to anyone. I’m sure our order will procure this new fabric sooner or later, but it might cause problems if other people learn of this ahead of time.”

“Ah, I get it. I’ve heard mass-producing the insoles proved to be quite the challenge.” Dorino nodded along.

Randolph gazed straight at Volf with a very serious look. “Shall I sign a contract at the temple?”

“What for?”

“To keep this all a secret. I come from an earl family from foreign lands and I have lived and studied there for five years as well.”

“There’s no need to go that far. You’re a friend, Randolph.”

“*You* may have no qualms, but Miss Dahlia is the chairwoman of the company. Would it not be prudent to protect the company?” he asked, turning to Dahlia.

Dahlia was flustered, suddenly having the matter put back on her. But she agreed with Volf; as Randolph was his friend, there was no reason to believe he’d leak any secrets to anyone unrelated. “No, I don’t think that will be necessary.”

“Then I swear on my blade—nay, on my friendship, that I shall speak of this to none other. Will you accept my word, Miss Dahlia?”

Swearing on not his sword but as a friend? How was she to respond to that? “Yes, thank you,” Dahlia said, for lack of a better choice of words. That seemed to please him; his auburn eyes smiled back.

After a break in their conversation, the men cleaned up from dinner, thanked Dahlia, and headed out of the Green Tower. The moon hung up in the dark navy sky.

“No need to leave in a hurry because of us, Volf. You have the day off tomorrow, don’t you?” said Dorino.

“Nah, it’s getting late. I’ll go with you guys.”

The blue-eyed youth smiled subtly, the tower still within sight behind him. “You and Ms. Dahlia *are* in a relationship, right?”

“A relationship between friends, yes. And since when did you call her by her first name?”

“Oh, since earlier. Anyway, you’re just a friend to her, right? So you wouldn’t stop me or Randolph if we were to seriously court her?”

“I...wouldn’t.”

“Pfft.”

“Nonsense.”

Dorino and Randolph, respectively, dismissed him at the same time.

“I couldn’t stop anyone who would try to woo Dahlia. It’s not like I’m in a position to stop you two from doing so either. That said, though, I wouldn’t like to be your friend anymore.” He continued walking down the road, his steps getting heavier and heavier, oblivious to the fact that his friends had stopped behind him. He turned around to find them muttering to each other.

“Wow. I haven’t heard anyone say that since, what, elementary school? How does a full-grown man get away with saying something like that?” Dorino said.

“I’ll say. Not that we could do anything about it since his family is soon to get their marquise.”

“You nobles sure are tricky to deal with. Ugh, let’s keep drinking at someone else’s place.”

“Agreed.” The two knights ran to catch up with Volf.

“I’m just putting it out there, Volf; I’m on team blondies and team breasts,” Dorino said.

“I see.”

“What about you, Randolph?”

“Hmm. Miss Dahlia would make for an excellent, thoughtful wife.”

“Randolph...?”

Dorino patted him on the shoulder twice. “Cool off, my man. We’re just messing with ya. You know how deadpan he is.”

“I have said nothing but the truth: I have no intentions of courting her. Standing and serving her wine was me thanking her for the meal, and not in an ‘*Oh, I wish to get to know you intimately*’ kind of way.” The ‘*Oh, I wish to get to know you intimately*’ part was said in his native tongue.

Noblemen stood up to pour red wine for women who were lower in social standing or titleless as a sign of interest in her. If the woman stood up as well, then it meant that she understood his intention. It was written down in the book Volf’s mother had left behind, but Dahlia must’ve forgotten all about it.

“Randolph.”

“Yes, Volf?” His expression remained as firm as usual, but he looked back at Volf with a knowing smile.

Then, without another word, Volf proceeded to strengthen his hand and grip Randolph on the shoulder. It creaked and groaned, and the shieldsman with rust-colored hair strengthened his hand to rip Volf’s fingers off.

Dorino looked on with exasperation. “Whenever you morons are done with that, we’ve got to hurry to our next drinks.”

Volf and Randolph separated from each other and continued down the moonlit path.

“Still, that was shocking, Dorino, what you said to her,” Volf said.

“I know, I know. I said I’m sorry. But you and I have known each other for seven years, and only for the past four years have we been able to shoot the shit like this; of course I’d be worried seeing how Ms. Dahlia got so close to you in mere months!”

“Thanks, Dorino,” Volf replied in nearly a whisper.

Dorino sighed. “Plus, you might look like Prince Charming on the outside, but deep inside, you’re just a teenage boy.”

“Hey, that’s mean of you. I was trying to have a heart-to-heart with you, you know?”

“Volf, you ought to reflect upon yourself.”

“Et tu, Randolph?! Just because we didn’t have monsters to beat up today, doesn’t mean you’ve gotta take it out on me!”

The teasing and the laughing amongst the three friends lasted long into the night.



In a room that the Rossetti Trading Company rented on the second floor of the Merchants’ Guild, Dahlia and Ivano faced each other.

“What brilliancy have you brought to me again, Ms. Dahlia?” Ivano, with a familiar pale green scarf wrapped around him, smiled when he saw the bundle of documents appear before him. It was the specification documents for her new cooling fabric, a list of the products she wanted to make from it, and plans for its manufacture. Dahlia had thrown together everything that Volf and the other knights had talked about last night.

“I do believe there are too many variations to produce at once, but they should all be feasible.”

“Let’s see. They all seem to be clothing-related, yes? I will definitely speak to Madam Gabriella about this, but may I consult Mr. Forto of the Tailors’ Guild as well?”

“Yes, please.” As her primary product, Dahlia planned to fashion

undergarments out of her new breezy fabric, so naturally, having the help of the Tailors' Guild would be best.

"Does anyone other than Sir Volf know about this?"

"I had Volf's friends from the Order of Beast Hunters help me come up with it, and he's already asked them to keep silent about the matter."

"All right, that shouldn't become a problem, then." Suddenly, the smile vanished from Ivano's face. He turned dead serious and looked at her with his navy eyes. "Now, chairwoman, I have to say—this is quite the risky business with which we shall be dealing."

"I thought so too. It'll deplete all stocks of green slime." Dahlia recalled hearing that the manufacturing of her waterproof cloth had caused great trouble for the Adventurers' Guild as they hadn't enough blue slime, and she didn't want to cause the same problem with green slime this time. She made a mental note to double-check what materials they would require, and in what amounts, as well as what manufacturing processes would be involved.

"While that is true as well, what I'm referring to is the fact that both clothing and equipment for royal knights would involve rights and the nobility. When your new products reach the masses, there will definitely be people trying to get a slice of our pie."

"Perhaps we shouldn't embark on this venture, then? I just want to help out the order, if that's possible."

"I'm not suggesting we quit. Remember that I'd told you to 'feel free to follow your instincts and create whatever ideas appeal to you,' and I stand by that. You figure out the products, and I'll figure out a way to safely produce and market them." Ivano rubbed the scarf on his neck and softened his expression. "I presume, then, you'd like to prioritize the Order of Beast Hunters?"

"Yes, that's right. I hope the products will bring them some relief." It was concerning just how stifling the knights' uniforms were, and making their expeditions easier—even if just a little—was all she wanted. After hearing her explanation, the man in front of her closed his eyes and nodded to himself a few times.

“I understand well, chairwoman. I present you with two options. The first: we get Mr. Forto of the Tailors’ Guild involved and codevelop the products with him. That will secure profits and safety, as well as credits. The second is that we present a proposal to Captain Grato of the Order of Beast Hunters. In exchange for giving the order our highest priority, we will have him as the Rossetti Trading Company’s point of contact within the castle.”

He delivered the options very matter-of-factly even though the two men were a viscount and a marquis, respectively. Dahlia feared that a titleless commoner of a chairwoman like herself would be overstepping boundaries. “Um, would that not cause trouble for Mr. Forto or Captain Grato?”

“If anything, they would do their damndest to make it all work. Mr. Forto is the guildmaster of the Tailors’ Guild, so he would want the products to succeed from a business standpoint, and Captain Grato would want priority for the knights of his order.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

“I doubt there would be anyone foolhardy enough to harass us, knowing that the Rossetti Trading Company has the support of the Merchants’ and Tailors’ guildmasters and the captain of the Order of Beast Hunters.” Ivano went on to joke that, however unthinkable, the only people who *could* were dukes and royals. However, Dahlia didn’t see the humor, and so he continued, “If possible, we should pay our respects to Sir Volf’s elder brother.”

“Volf’s brother? Why is that?”

“He is due to take over as head of the Scalfarotto household and become marquis next year. So I’ve heard from Lord Jedda—sorry, I mean *Mr. Leone*. Still haven’t gotten quite used to it.” Jedda, the master of the Merchants’ Guild, had requested that Ivano and Dahlia address him by his given name. Though neither of them felt very natural doing so yet, they were still going to do as ordered.

Volf was from an earl family, but in less than a year’s time, he’d be from a marquis family; Dahlia couldn’t help but feel forlorn as the distance between them grew. She made an effort not to show it and chose her words carefully. “A joyous occasion.”

“Yes, quite. If I’m not mistaken, the kingdom currently has four dukes and

seven marquis. We may not have as many high-ranking nobles as other nations, but that is likely because we have enjoyed enduring peace.”

“Something I am very grateful for, needless to say. It’s peace that allowed this kingdom to flourish and me to create the magical tools I want.” As far as Dahlia knew, the Kingdom of Ordine had never conferred titles for wartime merits as the nation had never been at war since its foundation. Instead, honorary titles and promotions were liberally given for developments in fields such as infrastructure, education, agriculture, trade, technology, and magical tools. On the other side of the coin, any form of embezzlement, bribery, or other criminal involvement was harshly punished and would instantly result in someone being stripped of their rank.

“Chairwoman, if there’s anything about my suggestions that you don’t wholeheartedly approve of, let me know and I shall think of something else. Perhaps you’re not happy about having Mr. Forto’s name on your inventions?”

“I don’t mind sharing credit, just as long as I get every bit of feedback if there are any problems or complaints.”

“I see, I see. Speaking of which, there was a bit of feedback regarding the insoles, such as reusability, pricing, and sizing. I presume you’ve given them all your perusal?”

“Yes, I have. Have there been other problems?”

“We’ve received about twenty messages recently urging us to hurry and manufacture more of the insoles, but there’s little we can do as we’re at maximum capacity already.”

Dahlia smiled as that was the best kind of problem to have. Not only were the insoles popular with the Beast Hunters, but news of them had already traveled within the castle and various other guilds. Hearing that one’s product was so helpful and well-liked was a source of joy for its creator.

Ivano continued, “Very well. Let us press on with the development of the cooling cloth. As it’s summer already, we’ll have the Order of Beast Hunters field-test the products. We’ll aim to be profitable by next year. I think this schedule should work very well for us.” Though Dahlia knew he was great at egging people on, she still went along with him as she wasn’t a merchant but a

magical toolmaker. “Is there anything else I can help you with, chairwoman?”

“Just one thing...” She began recounting the incident with the maid, and Ivano scrunched up his face.

“My apologies. I should have accompanied you to the castle after all. It might be worthwhile to have an attendant who could also double as a bodyguard.”

“Even at the castle?”

“It’s much safer that way. The sight of a big brawny lad could help deter would-be attackers, but it’d of course be best if he had the skills to back up his intimidating figure. Still, that wouldn’t solve a problem like yours in the powder room. Perhaps it would be best to have a female bodyguard in that case.”

Though she feared she would be hard-pressed to find a woman like that, Dahlia gave the idea some serious thought. Any corridor or room in the castle would more than likely be safe due to all the knights, making the washrooms the only dangerous places. “To avoid having something like this happen again, I’ll be sure to drink less before and during my visits to the castle from now on.”

“Be serious, now, Ms. Dahlia. It’s the middle of summer and you’re bound to collapse from heatstroke.”

“I’ll be fine. When I know I’ll be needing a lot of time experimenting in the workshop, I refrain from drinking too much water anyway.”

“Chairwoman,” growled Ivano. He squinted in a catlike fashion, and his navy eyes looked bluer than ever. Dahlia wondered what the problem was; she noted that gaze was reminiscent of Gabriella’s. He continued, “You always chastise me if I work overtime, telling me to take better care of my health.”

“Yes...”

“As my superior, chairwoman, you are an example for a subordinate like me. You ought to be a better role model.” He proceeded to earnestly remind her about the importance of staying hydrated, after which he said he’d make a point of accompanying her on all future trips to the castle until he found a suitable escort for her.



Word was that the Magical Garment Factory had been hastily built by the Tailors' Guild to facilitate the production of the toe socks and insoles. However, when she was invited there, Dahlia saw only a sturdy brick behemoth of a building. In fact, the site was so large that it had its own carriage station.

The reception room was carpeted in red and contained a table of brown wood polished to a high luster and a number of excessively plush sofas trimmed in black leather. Sinking into the sofas were Tailors' Guildmaster Fortunato—with his attendant and maid in tow—as well as Lucia, Ivano, and Dahlia.

Ivano had already given Fortunato the gist of Dahlia's new invention, and so the Rossetti Trading Company had brought a few samples to the meeting today to discuss potential use cases and other products to bring to market. "And so, our company wishes to codevelop this new fabric and have the Order of Beast Hunters test the prototypes in the hopes of mass-producing them next year."

"What a groundbreaking magical tool. Your terms are very reasonable. On behalf of the Tailors' Guild, I extend my gratitude to the Rossetti Trading Company." Fortunato seemed genuinely pleased with the pale green scarf wound around his neck, infecting Ivano with the same smile. They were so comfortable around each other that Dahlia wondered just when and how they had become so close. "Let us dive into the technical side of matters. For helmet liners, we can provide the cap type upon request, but it would be preferable to have the users learn how to properly wrap the cloth themselves. It would be straightforward enough to make a few minor adjustments to the scarf to adapt it for that purpose."

"How about for the back and the chest?" asked Dahlia.

"It would be difficult to create a one-size-fits-all version considering the differences in physique between each knight. Initially, we can have a simple cut of fabric to slip over the head and then eventually make a sleeveless undershirt," Fortunato answered as he flipped through the documents.

"I have heard that the knights would like to cool their underarms as well, Mr. Forto, so would it be possible to do a short-sleeved undershirt instead?"

"I believe most of them would prefer a sleeveless version so that it wouldn't restrict any movement in the shoulder area, but yes, having both options is a

good idea. We should prioritize boxer trunks for the cavalry too, but perhaps we should make them longer than usual so that they don't ride up on the rider."

"I see... I hadn't considered that the fabric would impede full range of motion. That being the case, would a patch for the back of the knee be less than ideal?"

"It might potentially be a concern, yes, but I'm sure that some would enjoy it. What about insertable pads or knee braces? That way, we give the users more freedom." Forto's insight as both the guildmaster of the Tailors' Guild and a former knight was proving indispensable. As he presented ideas for improvements and experiments, he sketched out designs that looked beautiful enough to be plastered on the outside of the building as posters. "I think this will be wonderful as our first batch, and if all goes well, other aristocrats within the castle may want to purchase from us too."

"I thought that the castle had both cooling and chilling fans already."

"Unfortunately, they're hardly enough when one is wearing a man's formal three-piece suit. The aristocrats sweat right through their suits even when they're cut out of thin summer fabrics."

"I would never have guessed, seeing how composed you seem, Mr. Forto..."

"It's partially determination, but also because I have this with me." He proceeded to take off his suit jacket and removed a small magical tool secured to his collar and breast pocket. The thin housing—about as thick as Dahlia's two hands pressed together—was connected with long tubes that reached around his collar and back. Forto dragged the device out from under his shirt and placed it on top of the table. "This is called the pocket ventilator. It's powered by an air crystal; it sends wind through the tubes to air out the back and sleeves. I turn it on whenever I'm in the hallway or in the bathroom; it really helps with sweating."

"Can it not be used continuously?" It sounded as though it couldn't possibly bring much relief.

"As it isn't completely silent, it wouldn't be suitable for anywhere too quiet. It also prints through clothing if it's set too strong. There's also the problem of odor in a confined space."

“Would it be improper to take off your suit jacket or wear short-sleeved shirts?”

“For a man, yes. Though there are cooling and chilling fans at the castle, higher-ranking nobles tend to stay sitting in cool rooms, meaning that after a long meeting, they would be damp *and* cold. Your fabric would even prevent sweat stains.”

“The nobility sure has it rough as well...” Even with the aid of the pocket ventilator, people from the upper class had little choice but to bear with the heat.

“Royals and nobles who wield ice magic likely wouldn’t have such a need, however. With sufficient magic, they could produce large enough ice cubes to cool or perhaps even chill the whole room.” How enviable on a hot summer’s day. They wouldn’t even need any fans in that case.

“It might help to combine the different pieces of clothing.”

“How do you mean combine clothing?”

“You could sew just the shirt cuffs and collar onto a suit jacket, but, er, I suppose that would be too brazen.”

“The imagination in you, Dahlia! I’ve got to give that a shot next time,” exclaimed Lucia, who, meanwhile, was finally getting her turn to try on the cooling scarf. She had been listening quietly until now; she had likely been too considerate of Forto to ask for the fabric. Lucia caressed it with her fingertips, wrapped it around her neck, then buried her face deep into it. “Oh, that’s nice...”

“L-Lucia!”

“I *need* lingerie made of this stuff!” she shouted again after coming up for air. “Sweat stains will be a problem of the past! Make brassieres and corsets lined with this stuff, please! Oh, and bloomers and skirts too! I’ll never get my dresses all sweaty again!”

Forto, likely already accustomed to Lucia’s outbursts, acknowledged her without giving any indication of being disturbed. “I see. Thin fabrics tend to cling to the skin, but with this layer in between, you’ll be able to wear tiered

dresses in the summer too.”

“This breezy fabric can prevent clothing from being damaged by armpit or back sweat too!”

“Good point. This would be perfect for brides at summer weddings; it would prevent sweat from yellowing their wedding dresses—particularly noblewomen, as they tend to wear gowns with many layers.”

“Yes, that would be swell, but I wish to introduce this product for everyday use too,” Dahlia chimed in.

“For commoners, you mean?” Forto didn’t seem to have even considered that they would have use for the material as well.

“Yes, correct. The summer heat can be deadly for manual laborers, but even sweat rash can be quite the nuisance.”

Ivano suddenly joined the conversation. “I see. Just the scarf would make for a great improvement, then.”

By virtue of economies of scale, there would be great cost advantages to opening up the products to customers beyond knights and nobles. Employing the far-reaching influence of the Tailors’ Guild and having the assistance of the Order of Beast Hunters for prototyping would help drive prices down, resulting not in luxury goods but magical tools for the masses.

“If that’s the case, then we’ll need tenfold—no, a hundredfold more green slime. Both the Adventurers’ Guild and Tailors’ Guild will need to upgrade our slime-farming facilities,” said Forto.

“I apologize in advance for causing so much trouble again.”

“No, you needn’t apologize. The Tailors’ Guild is more than happy to work with the Rossetti Trading Company, and even if the Adventurers’ Guild isn’t, we’ll find a way to make things work. I’ll even turn the gardens in my estate and villa into slime farms for you.”

“Oh, umm...” A backyard slime-farming operation within the nobles’ quarter might be more practical than it sounded, but what fright it would cause Forto’s family and servants.

“Dahlia, do you think we could apply this enchantment to an even thinner fabric?” asked Lucia.

“As long as it breathes well, sure.”

“And what about the color? It’d be nice to have options other than a pale green.”

“That might be a little more challenging given that we’re using *green* slime.” After all, it was in the name and it was what provided the air magic. Dahlia had tried before to combine green slime powder and a neutralizing agent, only for it to turn duller in hue; she’d failed to bleach the color completely.

“No, it’s possible...” muttered Forto.

“It is?”

“Dyes for monster materials are either made with the inverse color or with opposing materials. I’m sure there is something that would work on green slime, but the formulae are trade secrets. I trust you all to keep this confidential, of course.”

“That’s amazing!” Lucia shouted. If it did work on clothing, then it would open up so many more possibilities.

“It seems just a tad wasteful, seeing how the products would be disposable.”

“Wait, hm. Miss Dahlia, for magical tools enchanted with red or blue slime—do they get dyed in the respective colors of the slime as well?”

“Yes, both of them, quite so. When detoxified, red slime can even be used for lipstick.”

“So would you say they would make for good dyes?”

“I think there is that potential, yes.”

“If that’s the case, would you like to try out our tailors’ and litsters’ dye-fastening method?”

“Please explain.” As a magical toolmaker, Dahlia had worked with dyes to a certain extent, but she had never heard of whatever special method the tailors used.

“Rather than using magic, our method utilizes temperature changes and chemicals for color impregnation. No added magic should mean no interference, and we have developed around eighty color combinations, so I’m sure there is something that will work. We ought to test if it would be possible to change colors after dyeing—or to dye after changing colors.”

“I, er, wouldn’t want to place an undue burden on the craftspeople.”

“You needn’t worry. They’ll be happy to do as you ask, and that includes me.” Forto sounded as though he was getting rather excited.

To his side, Lucia was still nuzzling and rubbing her face against the scarf. “Have you thought about a name for this yet, Dahlia?”

“No, not yet. It cools, so how about ‘coldcloth’? Or perhaps ‘windcloth’?”

“Sounds like you’d catch a cold wearing it. ‘Breezecloth’? ‘Galecloth’? No, that’s not right either...”

“How about naming it ‘zephyricloth’?” Forto suggested.

“Ooh, that sounds like it’s from another world or something!” exclaimed Lucia.

“I didn’t take you for a muse, Mr. Forto.” Ivano seemed genuinely impressed, and so was Dahlia. There was a world of difference between her naming sense and Forto’s.

“It might be even cooler if you make it a bit stronger too...” Lucia said.

“Speaking of which, I actually did bring along a slightly more powerful version.” From her bag, Dahlia took a small magically sealed box containing a white handkerchief. It was made of two layers of gauze, one of which had the signature pale green crosshatching. “This was a failed experiment, to tell you the truth. The green slime lines were painted on maybe a little too wide and thick for the surface area, so it’s a little stronger than I’d like.”

That much was apparent when Lucia took the handkerchief into her hands; it produced a stiff blast of wind. She unfolded it and pressed it against her face. “Dahlia, we’ve got to make garters out of it!”

“You could cuff it around your knee if it gets stuffy under—Lucia?!”

Suddenly, Lucia hitched her skirt up high and stuffed the handkerchief under the opening of her stockings. She jumped to her feet and the hem of her skirt hovered around her. “Look! I don’t even need a pannier, and it keeps the waistline slim and sexy! This opens up so many more possibilities for dresses!”



“That’s ingenious, Lucia! With this cloth, people can layer on the lace and chiffon all they like. Oh, I’ve got so many ideas for dresses now!” Forto’s smile was blinding. Dahlia had always seen him as a viscount and the guildmaster of the Tailors’ Guild, but it turned out that deep inside, he’d always been a designer like Lucia. “I can’t thank you enough, Miss Dahlia. Your invention has brought light into my life.”

“The pleasure is all mine.”

“I would give you my sword to work with you on this project—or perhaps to defend you with my life.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Fortunato?!” For a knight to offer their sword symbolized their devotion to their lord—or to a lover. Obviously, he had meant it as a joke, but it came as such a shock that Dahlia failed to remember to address him as “Forto.”

“Dahlia, let’s brainstorm all the ways we can use the fabric! Why don’t you stay over at my place tonight? Of course, I wouldn’t mind staying at your place either!” Lucia clung tightly to Dahlia’s arm.

“Lucia...” It was almost frightening how dazzling Lucia’s eyes were, but she was undoubtedly more knowledgeable in this field than Dahlia was and there was a lot to learn by discussing the zephyricloth’s uses and capabilities with her.

“There is a lot of potential to uncover here, I believe—for example, by varying how strongly the breeze blows. Why don’t the two of you come over to my estate? We can talk as much as we like, but I also have a workshop if we want to tinker as well. You’ll be free to try any sort of fabric or material you’d like. I’ll even get a trusted stitcher to sew everything we dream up!”

“That’s a great idea, Mr. Forto!” Lucia said with much excitement.

“This is just a personal hobby, but I do have a collection of fabrics and threads made from monster materials as well. Some of them are quite special, as you’ll see. So, how about it, Miss Dahlia?”

“Monster fabrics and threads...”

“I’ve got various butterflies and arachnids; baphomets and monster pupae

from neighboring nations; sleipnir and unicorn fabric; and rare materials like thread made of giant crawfish antennae too.”

“You certainly do have my attention,” Dahlia mused. She tried to step on the brakes but instead drifted further into consuming curiosity. Trying to contain her eagerness, she looked at him. “It sounds terrific. We won’t even need alcohol to pull an all-nighter.”

Forto grinned from ear to ear—not as a guildmaster but as a tailor.

As Forto looked over, smiling like a boy, Ivano leaned back into his seat. There was no place for him in this conversation anymore. He’d long understood that Lucia and Dahlia were nearly identical in character, but what he had not foreseen was that Forto would get swept up in all this excitement—that someone with his power and position would take the reins. Upon opening the proverbial box, they’d discovered that they were all comrades in arms. Forto may have presented himself as equal parts aristocrat, merchant, and tailor, but he was no less married to the needle and thread than Lucia. With the three of them equally giddy, Ivano alone would be powerless to ground them. If anything, it could serve to hasten the process of bringing the zephyricloth to market, so he decided he may as well let things run their course.

He watched with a plastered smile as he raised his cup, though it wasn’t the maid but Forto’s attendant who refilled it with black tea. The two men shared a helpless, defeated look, and then Ivano went back to silently sipping his tea.

An hour later, Forto invited everyone to stay the night at his residence, to desperate protests from Ivano and the attendant. As a compromise, the three of them instead burned the midnight oil in a workshop within the Magical Garment Factory and bustled around into the wee hours.



The midday sun shone over the roof of the headquarters of the Order of Beast Hunters, yet it seemed brighter and cheerier inside than it did outside.

“It works so well! No more sweaty summer expeditions!”

“With this, my bow will never slip again!”

“O Zephyricloth, savior of the heavily armored...”

“This might just mean no more sweat rash on my behind...”

Voices of delight filled the room (and likely bothered the rest of the building). After changing elsewhere, knights had assembled in the big conference room, forming two lines before two tables. Sitting behind one with an open sketchbook were Forto, Lucia, and the vice-captain; behind the other, with a notebook, were Dahlia, Ivano, and Volf.

“I like how it doesn’t get hot under my helmet, but I wish the wind blew the other direction; it kinda stings my eyes.”

“Astorga, are you sure it’s not flipped the wrong way around?”

“Oh, you’re right. I knew something was strange. For these caps, it’d be nice to have clear markings for which side is which.”

“It would be a good idea to label it properly, then.”

One by one, the knights clothed in zephyricloth waited their turn to give out reviews and suggestions while the developers’ side asked them questions as well.

“A removable cooling pad for the back would be great, especially if it’s turned up a little stronger,” said a shieldsman in heavy armor.

“Putting these inside my gloves chafes my hands, so would it be possible to sew the fabric in?” asked an archer in all earnestness.

“I suppose that in the midst of combat, the scarf would be pinned in place or tucked inside the armor, but that might be a strangling hazard. I’d like it to blow a little gentler and for it to be removable too; it’s just a little too chilly for people my age,” commented a veteran knight.

“Wonderful as this is, it tickles my back to no end,” said a younger knight regretfully, holding back tears.

As different people had different needs, Dahlia realized it would be best to create patterns with different wind strengths and let the users pick the ones that suited them best. At the other desk beside her, Forto and Lucia sketched new designs as they chatted with the knights, and Dahlia knew for certain that

they were coming up with ideas they'd never thought of before.

Dahlia had returned to the Magical Garment Factory nine days in a row. There, she had spent all her time in discussion with Lucia and Forto and experimenting and revising the products with the Tailors' Guild's private magical toolmakers, tailors, dyers, and stitchers.

From the second day onwards, Dahlia had warned the factory's mages and toolmakers about the need to enchant the fabric with a uniform lattice of green slime, but it proved to be a rather difficult task. It took a few days before they were satisfied with their work. In the meantime, Forto and the craftspeople had wanted to work on the dye-fastening aspect, so even as Dahlia gave instructions, she had devoted all her time to making more zephyricloth.

It had taken only three hours to use up all her magic, after which Forto had brought a large crate full of mana potions. Each bottle cost two gold—no small sum—so Dahlia had firmly refused the offer at first. However, not only would he not take her money, he had claimed that the Tailors' Guild kept it in stock and urged her to drink up by dumping one into a glass right before her eyes. As opened potions didn't keep, Dahlia had ended up sipping on mana potion in place of black tea as she worked. Perhaps it was true that no medicine tasted good, as this was no exception. Healing potions were grassy, while regenerative potions had an astringent aftertaste—not unlike unripe persimmon juice watered down—and hardly a flavor one could get used to.

"Captain Grato, would you like to try the other prototypes as well?"

"You're only seeing the scarf, but I've got on the shirt, boxers, and knee braces underneath."

"Covered from head to toe, huh?"

"Frankly, it's a little chilly just sitting still like this." Some distance behind Dahlia's desk sat the grizzled captain of the Beast Hunters. With him as the liaison between the company and the castle, Ivano was bereft of anything he could do, as was Dahlia, needless to say.

Initially, Ivano had meant to visit Grato to deliver a letter as a courtesy, but as Forto had business at the castle that same day, he had gone in their stead and

returned with a letter from the captain stating that he would be glad to act as the liaison. Apparently, all Forto had had to do was smile and wrap the scarf around Grato's neck.

Then, when Ivano went to deliver the contract for the camp stove procurement, he had again asked for volunteers to try out the zephyricloth products. However, he hadn't expected that every single knight would be willing to act as a guinea pig.

When he had heard from the Tailors' Guild's toolmakers and mages how hard Dahlia had been working throughout the day, he'd dragged her home to prevent her from working through the night as well. Of course, he had forbidden her from working in her own home as well. Dahlia had realized that she had to lead by example, lest Ivano take her behavior as permission to work overtime himself. Even so, she'd been able to make an impressive number of samples of zephyricloth shirts and scarves for the knights to test out today.

"Ugh. I'd be asking for too much if I wanted these in time for our next expedition, wouldn't I, Captain?" asked a knight.

"It's hard having tried it once, eh?" Grato replied in a hushed tone, but all the other knights apparently had their ears perked.

"Could we, you know, take these prototypes with us, maybe?"

"Oh, man, imagine the bloodshed if you had to fight to get your hands on one."

"As soon as we sign a deal, we promise to immediately deliver enough scarves for everyone," Ivano interjected with great gusto.

"Captain Grato..."

"Captain!" All the knights turned to Grato, nearly begging on their knees.

He chuckled back at them somewhat awkwardly. "Very well. Let us sign a deal to ensure delivery this summer. We'll invest in the camp stoves next time, then."

The whole room burst into cheers. Dahlia looked shocked but couldn't help but smile too.

Grato continued, “Chairwoman Rossetti, just one question, however.” Taken by surprise, she panicked and bolted upright. Ivano followed suit and stood as well. “Are you certain that you would have me be your company’s point of contact with the castle? Making a deal directly with our purveyors should land you a bigger profit, not to mention the prestige that comes from doing business with the castle. Given your proven experience, I’d have no reservations about giving you my recommendation if you so wish.”

Dahlia gave the response that she and Ivano had prepared ahead of time. “We are very thankful for your kindness, but our company lacks the strength and numbers to manage everything. We wouldn’t want to be presumptuous and disrespectful toward the royal family and other nobles, so we have asked Lord Fortunato to mastermind this project for us.”

Forto stood up from the desk beside them and approached Grato. “Captain Grato, if we were to secure the knights’ supply without your cooperation, I’m afraid you’d stand to lose much support from noblewomen.”

“Do explain.”

The guildmaster stepped right up to the captain—almost too close. “I am referring to lining corsets and bustiers with zephyricloth. This is a game changer when wearing dresses. Never again will a lady’s makeup be ruined by the heat. My own wife has never begged me for anything quite like she begged me for the zephyricloth.”

Grato paused for a moment before responding. “I see. May I put on you the responsibility of corresponding with the noblewomen, then?”

“With your letter of recommendation, I will guarantee that they get priority,” he said with a smile before calmly returning to the table. Dahlia stared in horror, but all Ivano could do was sigh.

“We digress. I gratefully accept the task of liaising.”

“Thank you very much. We will do our utmost to cater to the knights’ requests.” Dahlia and Ivano bowed to Grato.

“If there is anything else you need, please don’t hesitate to ask me,” the captain said. “Oh, and please just call me Grato. May I have the honor of

addressing you as Rossetti as well?”

“Yes, thank you very much.”

“And your name was Mercadante, correct?”

“Please call me Ivano. And forgive me if I am overstepping boundaries, but won’t you call our chairwoman by her given name too?”

Grato furrowed his brows and hesitated to reply. “I’d rather not, as my wife is named Dalila...”

Volf, sitting behind him, silently tried to hide a smirk.

While everybody was engaged in small talk, a valet suddenly rushed in and whispered a message into Grato’s ear. The captain looked tense and troubled; he issued curt instructions that someone be admitted.

In walked a graying blond man about the same age as Grato. “Forgive my interrupting. I had heard that I’d find Captain Grato here.” His dark gray three-piece suit suggested that he was a bureaucrat, and pinned to his lapel was a pair of golden feathers. He must have been someone of high status, as Volf and the other knights stood up to greet him with bows. Dahlia, too, took a few steps backward and curtsied with Lucia. “That must be Chairwoman Rossetti. Perfect timing. I have just come back to return the estimation on the camp stoves.”

“Return it, you say?” Grato repeated with a grim look, drawing the attention of all his men. Dahlia feared there was a problem with the cost of the procurement, as the camp stove was hardly cheap.

“I have quite a few comments. First and foremost, I am just unsure how necessary this product is; the Beast Hunters have done fine without it until now.”

“That’s not your problem, and I believe this order fits well within the funds for expedition improvement and upgrades.”

“That may be so, but they’re still a good deal more expensive than the compact magical stove,” the man explained. Just as Dahlia had thought, the expense wasn’t to his liking; it was always about the numbers—both in Ordine

and Japan. He continued, “Besides, there have been voices of concern.”

“What about?”

“To put it bluntly, if I may, it’s about the credibility of the Rossetti Trading Company.”

“Are there not enough guarantors?”

“No, it’s that the company has yet to see even a single trip around the sun—but not only is it doing business with the castle, it has already won multiple contracts. People can’t help but raise their eyebrows. Furthermore, though the chairwoman’s father was a baron, he left her with no guardians of blood relation when he passed, a fact that inspires...opinions. In any event, it isn’t common to have a woman at the helm of a company, so there are bound to be *rumors* too, you see.” He flicked his chilling amber gaze to Dahlia and then to Volf before finally settling on Grato.

“I pay no heed to unwarranted rumors.”

“*You* may ignore them, Captain Grato, but that doesn’t mean the rumors don’t cast shadows. You know, word is that after being called into your room, the chairwoman emerged with stained clothing.”

“Gildo, you son of a...” Grato choked back his seething rage.

However, unruffled was the man called Gildo. “Pardon my late introduction, Chairwoman Rossetti. I am Gildovan Diels, Head Treasurer. The maid who caused you offense the other day has already been dismissed from the castle. Four gold should pay for your clothes, I assume?”

That had Dahlia’s mind in a spin. She’d understood the words he said, but she did not want to understand what he meant by them. The maid had apparently dirtied her clothes on purpose, and likely at the direction of this man, but what for? Merely to harass Grato? Unfortunately, Dahlia was caught in the crossfire, but there was nothing to suggest that Gildo cared. After some deliberation, she said, “Very pleased to meet you. I am Dahlia Rossetti of the Rossetti Trading Company. Keep the money; I am currently wearing the same skirt I did that day.” It showed no blemishes, as she had dyed it a dark green after the incident.

“Hm. Well, since you’re here already, chairwoman, could I have you submit a

detailed breakdown as well as your best price for the camp stove? If you can, I would even set up the time and place within the castle for you.”

Judging by the sarcastic glint in his eye, it wasn't something she should agree to, but Dahlia swallowed her indignity and anxiety. “A fine opportunity.”

“Ms. Dahlia!” Ivano chided her in a sharp whisper. She should have consulted him before answering Gildo, but it seemed that contracts could easily be nullified. If she could explain things in person, then she would.

“Very well. Let us meet in three days' time in the afternoon. Oh, and of course, should there be problems with anything, you are more than free to contact Captain Grato to refuse the meeting. Now, then, if you'll excuse me...” He brandished an oddly collected smile, at which Dahlia tensed up. As Gildo passed by her too closely for it to be an accident, he snarled in a whisper, “Let's see you try me, lap cat.”



It was clear as day that this man was a threat. It didn't take someone fluent in noblesse to figure out that by calling her "lap cat," he meant she was someone's lover. It was true that she had no title and hardly a strong track record. She neither looked nor conducted herself well enough to fit in at the castle. But how could Gildo possibly think that the whole order would sully their honor and bend the rules because they were under her spell? How little did Gildo think of these knights who put their lives on the line defending the kingdom's subjects?

In her previous life, Dahlia had never liked delivering presentations in front of people—not as a university student nor when she entered the workforce—but she had always given it her best. In three days, she would have to face the music. She bit the inside of her lip and watched as the man walked away.

As soon as the door closed behind Gildo, a sigh escaped from Dahlia's lips. She tried to turn around but found herself powerless. There was a frightening chill hanging in the air around her and her body had frozen solid. She could neither speak nor look around. Even breathing was difficult, as if she were sucking in thin mountain air.

"How dare he say that to Dahlia!"

"The shameless disrespect to Miss Dahlia, who has helped us so much..."

"Oh, I'm going to stick my old insoles in his shoes! Hope the bastard enjoys athlete's foot!"

"He sure seemed like the type to play dirty."

Suddenly, an older knight barked at his squadmates. "Cut that out, you knuckleheads! Don't use your intimidation skill here!" Evidently, everybody—including Volf—had overheard Gildo and Dahlia's exchange, though truth be told, seeing the knights all riled up in her defense made her a little happy.

Finally, Dahlia was able to turn around. When she did, she found Volf pressing the bridge of his nose, almost as if he were preparing to activate another wave of intimidation. Ivano and Lucia were both white as a sheet, while Forto appeared unfazed but was watching her with concern.

"Our apologies, everyone. Knights who used intimidation or made ridiculous

comments to themselves, you'll be putting on your armor and doing five laps around the training grounds later. Needless to say, you won't be bringing any zephyricloth with you."

"Yes, sir..." acknowledged the crowd with regret.

One knight looked toward their leader. "Captain Grato, what Marquis Diels said to Chairwoman Rossetti crossed the line. Won't you file a complaint, sir?"

Before Grato could answer, Dahlia did so for him. "I appreciate your consideration, but that won't be necessary."

"You've helped us so much, Chairwoman Rossetti. This won't make things right, but it's the least we could do," a senior knight said, bowing.

"Thank you, truly. But I want to withdraw the invoice as well. I might not get an apology out of it, but I ask that you allow our company to deal with this matter as we see fit." If Grato were to protest on her behalf, Dahlia would more than likely get an apology, but she would also be seen as a woman under his protection. She didn't want to drag Grato deeper into the rumors surrounding them. As a commoner, Dahlia had no grounds to demand an apology, but she could petition for Gildo to retract his statement. Though there was no guarantee that it would work, it would at least prevent any further misunderstanding. Not to mention, the knights had just referred to him as *Marquis* Diels—the same rank as Grato. Any friction with the treasury would only bring trouble to the Order of Beast Hunters in the future, and that was the last thing she wanted for them.

"Sorry, Rossetti. That was supposed to be targeted at me, not you. Let me snuff out the unsavory rumors too. I just beg that you forgive his behavior."

"Captain Grato!" Volf shouted.

But Grato ignored him and instead spoke with slight contempt for himself. "That man's brother died by my hands, you see." His words silenced the room. "A long time ago, on our way home from an expedition, one of our knights fell from his horse and died. The doctors said a combination of anemia and malnutrition got to him. At the time, our meals and rations were even worse than they are now. He wasn't eating well enough, and I failed to realize that."

“Captain Grato, that isn’t your—”

“That expedition was under my command. My friend had entrusted his younger brother to me and I accepted the responsibility. I am to blame for everything.” His voice creaked like an old man’s, and it hurt Dahlia’s ears so.

The Order of Beast Hunters not only had to risk their lives fighting monsters but had to do so even when fighting hunger and illness. Dahlia thought back to the first time she and Volf had met—how bloodied he had been—and felt sick.

He continued, “I will renegotiate with the treasury. If it doesn’t work out, then we’ll buy as many as our budget will allow. The remainder, I’ll buy with my own money.”

“Thank you very much for your commitment. May I ask that you allow me to make the appeal to the treasury?”

“You needn’t be so considerate. That man is exactly as he appears. I doubt he would make it a pleasant experience.”

“I am prepared for that. I would love to take this opportunity and turn it into a learning experience.” Researching and developing magical tools was essentially hurdling. It was Dahlia’s responsibility to worry about whether to jump over, run through, or walk around. Commerce wasn’t that far off from research either; watching Ivano perform, she knew that managing business relationships was much the same for him. Dahlia understood that, just because a product was simple, it didn’t mean the business side would be simple as well. Setting aside whether or not she’d fallen into Gildo’s trap earlier, she knew that, as an inventor and chairwoman, she had to take that step forward and do all she could.

“A learning experience, eh? If only you were a man, then adopt—wait, hold on...” Grato muttered inaudibly with a hand over his mouth. Just as Dahlia was about to ask him to clarify, the grizzled captain cleared his throat.

“Would it be possible to explain to Lord Diels the importance of field rations?” she asked.

“Even if you had the chance, I doubt it’d be easy to get him to understand.”

Hearing his pained voice, Dahlia hung her head. “My sincerest apologies. I

failed to consider my words before speaking aloud.”

“No, I appreciate the thought.”

Afterward, Forto took over and returned to the topic of the zephyricloth as if nothing had happened. However, everybody else had far less to say, and the excitement in the air was long gone. After collecting the squad’s thoughts about and opinions on the fabric, there was no more conversation to be had.

As they boarded a carriage at the castle’s station, Ivano stepped out to speak with Forto for a moment, and Volf, acting as their party’s escort, tried to comfort his friend. “Hey, listen. I hope you don’t feel disheartened. Your creations are very much boons for everybody, and our squad couldn’t be any more grateful to you.”

“Thank you for telling me, Volf. I feel like I can now try even harder.” Dahlia was beat, what with everything that had happened today, but she felt she had to go over things with Ivano and get ready for that all-important presentation. If it meant a formal procurement, then the Rossetti Trading Company *ought* to do all they could to showcase just how good their camp stove was. The anxious thought made her clench her fists tightly.

“You don’t need to.”

“I...” She wanted to protest but lost the words to do so.

“Dahlia, I can tell you’re doing your best, and your best is more than enough. We’ll do something about it on our end too, so I hope you can stop worrying about it.”

“Was it that obvious?”

“Yeah. You looked like you were so worried that I was worried you’d get wrinkly right about here,” he said, laughing and pointing to the middle of his own brow.

Seeing that smile of his allowed her to release the tension from her shoulders. “I’ll be careful. I wouldn’t want any wrinkles just yet.”

“‘Yet’? So you’re hoping for them someday?”

“When I get to the right age, wrinkles would make me look like a wise and powerful toolmaker, don’t you think?”

“Wise and powerful, huh?” Volf’s shoulders shook as he stifled a chuckle.

He might have thought he was slick and subtle, but it didn’t get past Dahlia. She wasn’t joking, but being able to banter like this was a breath of fresh air; it was only now she realized how much she’d been holding in from earlier. Once things calmed down, it’d be nice to get a drink with just the two of them, shooting the breeze about all kinds of tools and monsters. And so she took that courageous step and asked, “Volf, after my presentation, would you like to unwind with me and a few drinks?”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll find us a real nice bottle,” he said, raising his hand only to retract it immediately. “Sorry, that’s out of habit; just something I do with Dorino and the others.”

Was he looking for a high five? A brotherly clasp of the hands? Whatever it was, she realized she was actually rather happy that he had inadvertently been so chummy with her of late. With the tip of her finger, she lightly pecked his palm and giggled. “I can’t wait.”

Interlude: Escort Duty & the First Cup of Tea

Volf stared out the coach window at the stars twinkling between the clouds. Lady Altea, a dowager duchess, was attending a soiree and Volf was waiting on her as her escort. As he had always done, Volf finished with practice, changed, then came to the venue in a coach. Until Altea decided it was time to head home, Volf had little to do but relax inside the vehicle—or at least, he would have if he could have. Volf couldn't catch a wink, and neither could he summon up the appetite for the rather luxurious light meal that his client had arranged for him. Time ticked by all too slowly.

At evening parties such as tonight's, Altea was always the last one to arrive and the first one to leave. Her escort when arriving was usually either a knightly noble or Volf himself. When she left the party, Volf or that same knight would accompany her out. He didn't know, and didn't particularly want to know, who her other chaperones were.

Dahlia had asked Volf to deliver a gift in return for the apple brandy Altea had given her. Dahlia had decided the shoe-dryer might be less than appropriate, though she hadn't been sure if the compact magical stove she'd ultimately decided on was any better. Her reasoning was that, at the very least, Volf had some connection to the stove. Whether or not Altea would actually use it was another matter. Despite all her deliberations, Dahlia had made an effort to wrap the present nicely and had had Volf bring it with him today.

Volf, however, wasn't worried about the present as much as he was about Dahlia, given what had happened yesterday at the castle. But before they'd parted, Dahlia had revealed that what she herself worried about was the maid who had soiled Dahlia's skirt. Seeing just how much it was weighing upon her, Volf had promised her that he would bring it up to Grato and Guido to make sure the maid was all right. Apparently, he was the only one in the dark; Dorino and Randolph had already known about the incident. It could've been a mere coincidence, but more likely, they had chosen not to burden him with the matter—the thought swirled in his mind.

Finally, word came from a manservant. “Here comes Lady Altea.”

Volf double-checked his attire before stepping out of the coach. From behind the brilliant white walls and under the terracotta roof tiles came Altea. The path was lit up with nearly too many magical lanterns; the glare was hard to bear. When she arrived at the main gate, Volf smiled and extended his hand to her. “At your service, Lady Altea.”

“Thank you, Volfred.”

Volf’s task was to wait on Altea after a ball or dinner, and it was something he had done countless times already. Whether they were born of jealousy, desire, or admiration, the stares and glares others sent their way were something they never addressed. Their relationship was nothing enviable, so Volf simply did not care. As onlookers indiscreetly whispered amongst themselves, he escorted Altea to the coach. The moment they boarded and closed the door, Volf heaved a heavy sigh.

“I see you’re not fully present. You must comport yourself better in front of a lady, as it is a part of your duties as an escort,” she said with a teasing smile.

Volf apologized sincerely for his disrespect. “My apologies, Lady Altea. It shall not happen again.” He knew that as much as she was being considerate, she was also completely correct.

“Tell me, Volfred, is there something bothering you?”

“Erm, yes, I suppose.”

“Is it about work? Something classified?”

“No, it’s nothing confidential like that. The truth is that I have become a guarantor of a trading company, and the order would like to procure a product from said company. However, there seems to be a bit of a roadblock to its progress.”

“If you would like me to put in a word for you, do let me know.”

Volf deliberated for a moment before refusing. “Thank you very much. Just the thought is plenty.” Dahlia wouldn’t appreciate Altea interfering, he surmised.

“I see. Here I was worried that you were floundering because you wished to break up.”

“Break up? With whom?”

“With me, of course. Perhaps there might be someone jealous that you come to pick me up like this? If our association causes you trouble, Volfred, I would be happy to end it at any time.”

“Oh, no, Lady Altea. I do not have a girlfriend or that sort of relationship with anyone.” He couldn’t imagine Dahlia ever getting jealous. They were just friends, after all.

“In that case, would you be unbothered if that friend of yours danced with another man?”

If Dahlia were to become a baroness, there was a possibility that she would attend a ball. She would be stunning in a dress, but perhaps clumsy on the dance floor. Her safety would also be an issue, but he couldn’t stop her if that was what she wished to do. Instead, he would stand guard for her. “It would perhaps be concerning to me *as a friend*, but I would not stop her. I would be in no position to do so anyway.”

Altea squinted, laughing with only her eyes.

Back at the estate, Volf retired to his guest chambers after having a single glass of white wine.

The maid unwrapped the floral-patterned gift wrap in front of Altea, then presented the compact magical stove to her mistress. Included with it was a card folded in half—a very politely worded thank-you note for the gift of apple brandy. Altea placed the stove from Volf’s friend on the table in front of her. It seemed to have piqued her interest, as she rotated it around, examined it from all angles, and checked whether it had a magic crystal installed.

“Lady Altea, shall I use that to boil water for a pot of black tea?” the manservant asked in a half-joking manner. However, Altea was all smiles, genuinely in support of the suggestion. Not only that, she said that *she* would make the tea herself and even refused any advice on how to do so. The maid,

shaken up by this turn of events, shot daggers at the manservant from his side, eliciting feelings of guilt.

“But that’s so like him, isn’t it? That boy would never accept anything he couldn’t return in kind. He simply detests any favors from me,” Altea said in a puff as she checked on the now-boiling water on the stove. Then she scooped three spoonfuls of the fine loose leaf tea and dumped them in the bubbling pot. The maid covered her mouth as she silently screamed in sorrow.

“Perhaps it is because men are afraid of feeling indebted to women.”

“Is that true? Would it be wrong of me to want him to depend on me more, then?”

“That would be a difficult proposition for him in particular.” The image of Volf in the manservant’s head was one without a hair out of place. Volf had long been by Altea’s side, and in addition to being her escort, he also stayed the night from time to time. However, never had he bedded her, accepted a halfpenny from her, or had her wield her influence for his own gain. All the man did was come here.

When Volfred was accepted into the Scarlet Armors, Altea had asked her manservant to pick out a present for him, for which purpose he’d chosen a coin purse made of crimson fox pelt. It was an intricately decorated article crafted from fine materials, making it quite the valuable item. Volfred had graciously accepted the present with a smile, and the servant had been glad to see that it was to his liking. However, the following week, Volfred had returned with a similarly priced and just as meticulously made crimson fox accessory case. In return for a gift from someone of higher status—and especially a noblewoman—a simple word of thanks or a single flower would have sufficed. But Volfred wouldn’t have been satisfied with that. For him, every gift warranted an equal reaction to keep the scales perfectly balanced.

Ever since the first time they had met, the servant had thought that Volfred didn’t act his age; he never gave off the impression of a young man, much less a youth. He was always polite and respectful, he would always return greetings from all the domestic helpers, and he never acted full of himself. When Volfred was taught how to dance or to speak with nobility, he was diligent and tried his

best. The only time he would show himself just a little was when his meal or drink was particularly delicious, and even then that would be for but a few moments.

The manservant had a decent grasp on Volfred's personal history. The distance he kept from everyone perhaps made him a little frigid. But precisely because of that, when Volfred did act his age—rather, when he did act like a *boy*, it was all the more special for Lady Altea. Before anyone knew it, Volfred had become a common topic of conversation around the household.

"I wish Volfred would learn to let himself accept kindness, though. I suppose I'm mistaken to think that every man enjoys a woman's care." Altea grasped the switch with her fair, slender fingers and turned off the stove. Then she poured the contents of the pot through a strainer and into teacups, a precarious process.

It was far from the ideal way to make tea. The color of the liquid cried of its bitterness and astringency. The manservant silently watched over his mistress while the maid—now completely pale—was speechless and powerless to help.

"For the first time in my life, I have brewed black tea from water to liquor," Altea said with great satisfaction. It was hard for the servants not to be happy for her, or would have been, if not for the overwhelming dread they felt at the prospect of having to taste the tea she'd made. "Say, I would love to learn more about the issue that Volf mentioned earlier."

"I was under the impression that there was a promise to not put in a word for him?"

"Certainly I said I would not put in a word for him, but never did I say that I wouldn't pull a few strings."

"Lady Altea..." he said sternly, disapprovingly.

"It shan't be a problem to offer an umbrella for a pup to tide over a rainstorm." Her captivating smile reduced him to a deep sigh. For as long as their relationship had been, the manservant knew there was no stopping her. "Now, then, how about a cup of tea?"

Though she pretended to be fickle, she strove for the betterment of her

family and nation, and she showed deep compassion toward those who were close to her. For someone who had served Altea for nearly twenty years, to have the roles reversed and to be served tea by her—the very first she had ever brewed—was a great honor. Or perhaps it was a badge of great honor to be brave enough to try that so-called tea.

No sooner had the three of them tasted Lady Altea's first cups of tea than they were all in anguish.

For Whom the Camp Stoves

Inside the Merchants' Guild, where the Rossetti Trading Company rented a room for their office, Dahlia and Ivano sat across from each other at a table. The latter had given the clerks a silver piece each and asked them to take an extended coffee break, leaving the two of them alone. They had been going over and over the presentation and sale price for the camp stoves ever since returning from the castle.

"I think the details are all in order now. All that leaves is the pricing." Dahlia had finalized her presentation and was more or less fully prepared for her big day tomorrow. However, she and Ivano still hadn't agreed upon the finances.

"The precedent is that the treasury has always been, well, rather stingy toward the Order of Beast Hunters. From what I can tell, it all stems from the fact that the captain five generations prior padded expenses to embezzle money."

"That should be quite some time ago, right?"

"It was before we were even born. I only learned about it from Mr. Forto. He said that it was because of this incident that the kingdom dropped down to seven marquis from eight. Once the plot had been uncovered, their family was instantly stripped of all their titles and privileges." Bad blood led to bad blood. But Grato wasn't a wicked man like that; he cared for his knights so much that he would pay for the camp stoves out of pocket. "Anyway, I digress. The bottom line is that I will not allow you to sacrifice the company to make this sale, even if it's to help the Beast Hunters."

"Would it be too much of a sweetheart deal to sell at compact magical stove prices?"

"So sweet, it's saccharine, I say." Ivano took off his navy jacket, hung it on the back of his seat, and clasped his hands on top of the desk. He then took a deep breath before beginning again. "Let me tell you a story, chairwoman. My grandfather was known as a shrewd chairman. When he passed, my father—

who people knew as a virtuous chairman—inherited the family business. Father would help any friends in trouble and act as a guarantor for their loans, but it all came back to bite him in the behind. Credit, clients, assets, home, his and his family's lives—you name it, he lost it.”

“Ivano...”

“It may not sound honorable, but the basis of capitalism is profit. Compassion, love, and pride may fill the soul but not the stomach. Earning money is what makes us businesspeople and what makes our company. That is a lesson I learned when I was a whelp and one I would like you, the chairwoman of the Rossetti Trading Company, to learn before you repeat the same idealistic mistakes.”

His frank, earnest words warranted an equally fervent response. “Would the long-term business we stand to gain with the order not balance out this one contract?”

“You should know how rugged the design of the camp stove is. There’s no telling how many replacements they will order in the future, and that’s assuming they do make another purchase. Besides, if the plan is to sell to the rest of the castle, the compact magical stove would fit their needs better—if they are interested at all. What I’m trying to say is that we shouldn’t lower the price on the camp stoves.”

“But we’re making a decent profit off the toe socks and insoles, correct?”

“Sure, but those have nothing to do with the matter at hand. Merchants only want to deal in products that make them money.”

Ivano had a point—it wouldn’t make sense for the company to give the order special treatment, so Dahlia had to come up with a very good reason. “Maybe you could consider this an exercise in building relationships?”

“If it’s a matter of connections, then we have strong ones already with Sir Volf and Captain Grato,” he said. “They’ll eventually buy the camp stoves with their personal funds anyway, so all we have to do is wait. You’ve built a good product; business will come.”

“So that’s it? All we can do is accept that the Beast Hunters go risk it all to slay

monsters yet come back to camp for barely nutritious field rations? It may very well be the last thing some of them ever eat!”

“Wouldn’t you say that these are your personal feelings of sympathy and concern? I don’t think Dahlia the Chairwoman or Dahlia the Magical Toolmaker would agree that’s the only reason why you want this deal to go through.” Ivano looked at her calmly with his navy, almost indigo eyes. “Forgive me for saying so, Ms. Dahlia, but perhaps you’re conflating Sir Volf with the Order of Beast Hunters.”

Something that sounded like a scant scream spilled out from her lips as she realized Ivano was absolutely right. The stove had originally been only for Volf, but before she even realized it, it had become a product to sell to his squad. Now, though, Dahlia wanted them to use the camp stove; she hoped it would make their expeditions a little safer and more agreeable. But that all stemmed from Volf. She couldn’t erase from her mind the image of his bloody figure riddled with wounds.

Ivano continued, “I have no doubt that squad members would find the camp stove handy and appreciate your kindness. But this deal is not to help them out; it’s a business transaction. Moreover, if we keep whittling down our profits, the order will feel as though we’re looking down upon them. They’re knights, but they’re first and foremost men.”

“I’m sorry, Ivano. I hadn’t thought it out enough.” She hung her head and bit her lip. To put her friend before business and to have such a narrow outlook were failures on her part as chairwoman.

“Erm, try not to kick yourself over it, chairwoman. I know I speak too bluntly from time to time.”

“No, you’re right, and I thank you. Your honesty helped me see things the way they are.”

“I’m not suggesting we do so, but we’d likely get the amount we asked for if we were to loan out the camp stoves for trial, then sign the deal afterward. I doubt the head treasurer would be very favorably disposed to that idea, however.”

Dahlia felt a little remorseful, realizing that he was trying to be considerate of

her feelings. But the presentation at the castle was tomorrow, and there was no time to feel sorry for herself.

Ivano ran his hand through his mustard-colored hair. “If you wish to lower the price of the camp stoves, may I suggest that you consider alternative forms of compensation? Whether it benefits the company or you as a toolmaker, I wouldn’t mind.”

“Are you sure, Ivano?” she asked hesitantly.

“It costs us nothing to think, am I right? But you’ll have to get through me first, or you won’t be able to convince that old codger Gildo. You just know he’ll make things difficult for you.” He chortled, looking very pleased to dish out the insulting remark. Dahlia keenly realized that it was nothing short of a stroke of brilliance that she’d hired him.

“Believe that there is always a way. Think outside the box. Take as much time as you need” was what her father Carlo used to tell her when they worked together, and it was also exactly the spirit that she needed right now. There had to be a way to make the proposition more affordable for the knights, more profitable for the company, and more convincing for Ivano and Gildo. She wanted this to work out so badly that she’d even take a loss, as selfish as that was. “Can I take some time to deliberate?”

“Of course. I shall wait for you for as long as time allows.”

Dahlia started wringing out her brain. Whenever she wasn’t sharpening her pencil, she was scribbling down all the ideas that came to her mind. Soon, she’d filled both the front and back sides of five pages of note paper. As she kept her nose to the grindstone, she realized that she had been biting away at the fingernail of her left thumb—a habit she’d thought she had kicked as a child.

Her father had helped her with that too. Carlo would boil down water and chili peppers and paint it on her nails. He kept the spicy liquid in a red bottle with a big “For Dahlia” label on it. She chuckled to herself—it might have been enough to deter her as a child, but it would be little more than piquant to her now.

Suddenly, something clicked for her. “Ivano, may I consult you on an idea?”

“Sure thing. Would you like Madam Gabriella’s opinion as well? Or perhaps Volf—er, actually, it might be hard for him as one of the knights in the squad. Mr. Forto would be a great choice as well, seeing how experienced he is with these situations. All of them would be happy to lend an ear if you wish.”

“No. Just you, Ivano, please.”

“Forgive me. Please go ahead, chairwoman.” He fixed his necktie (even though nothing about it had been out of shape), sat upright, and looked straight at Dahlia.

If she couldn’t convince him, there was no chance the deal could go ahead. And without a deal, the knights would surely have a hard time enjoying the stoves if they came from Volf’s and Grato’s personal accounts.

“Let me explain.” Dahlia reached for a new sheet of paper and began scrawling on it as she talked Ivano through her idea. As it transpired, this conversation between chairwoman and employee would last for quite a while.



The following day, on the carriage ride toward the castle, Dahlia opened and closed her hand as if she were playing rock paper sans scissors with herself. Her fingertips visibly trembled, prompting Gabriella, sitting beside her, to grasp her hand tenderly.

“Fix your lipstick and smile, darling.”

“Huh?”

“Why do you seem so overwhelmed? You know, *you’re* the one who’s going to boil them alive with that magical stove of yours.”

“I am?”

“Or perhaps you’ll sauté them with that lid and skillet? Just make sure not to char them too much,” Gabriella said with a straight face, at which Dahlia couldn’t help but laugh. The vice-guildmaster, likely worried about how nervous Dahlia was, had tagged along for the ride to the castle.

Ivano, sitting across from them, wasn’t any more composed. He checked his documents over and over.

Dahlia took a few deep breaths, then carefully reapplied her lipstick. She looked in her compact to find a somewhat stiff but serviceable business smile staring back. Dahlia was dressed in a dress a shade brighter than navy blue. It was on the long side and proper—neither dragging on the ground nor revealing her chest or back. If there was a standard for dresses, this was it. It was suitable for the daughter of a baron and not a hair too fancy. There was a bit of a sheen and depth to the fabric, and the texture was extraordinarily comfortable.

The truth was that on their last visit to the castle, Forto had specifically prepared this fabric and, under Lucia's direction, a team of seamsters had spent two days sewing the dress for her. Dahlia had fretted about the cost of its production, but she had been told to take it as a zephyricloth prototype. The lines of the dress accentuated her delicate neck and wrists while tucking in the waistline she was so conscious about. Furthermore, the dress allowed her to raise her arms without losing its shape, crouch down without revealing her chest, and walk around with ease. The underlining was a beautiful aqua with zephyricloth pads affixed in various places, including the underarms and upper back.

When Dahlia frantically thanked them, Forto and Lucia were of the same mind.

"This is for when you head to the castle. Give them hell."

"It's your battledress! Go get that grumpy ol' codger!"

The two of them were surprisingly assertive, so Dahlia didn't bother refusing.

Dahlia had also had help from elsewhere. The night she got her dress, Volf had delivered to her stacks of declassified files on the royal knights. He had even gotten the rest of his squad to assist him. The evening after, he had flowers and cookies sent her way. Last night, he had rushed over to the Merchants' Guild to hear her out on her plan. In the end, Volf had asked her not to push herself too hard, to which she'd agreed with a smile.

Come to think of it, today's presentation was merely an opportunity afforded by chance. Even if she were to fail, the worst outcome was that the camp stove order would get slashed and Grato would purchase the rest in installments, meaning that the company wouldn't really be affected either way. Though the

head treasurer Gildo's words had been hard to stomach, she was willing to set her personal feelings aside and tackle the problem at hand. All she had to do was to stick to her plan and calmly execute it.

"I'm off, then, Gabriella."

"I'll be praying for your success," she said with a wave. Dahlia smiled in return and alighted from the carriage.

In a large conference room within the castle's central building, fifteen or so civil servant types sat in their seats. For whatever reason, knights from the Order of Beast Hunters matched their numbers. What Dahlia had heard was eight from the treasury department and three from the Beast Hunters, meaning her audience totaled nearly three times the headcount she had received beforehand.

"My apologies for the unplanned additions. The Beast Hunters requested to join shortly prior to us starting. As for the written material you have prepared for us, we would be happy to share copies between two people," said one of the bureaucrats who would be Dahlia's assistant for the day. He dipped his head in apology; his brow glistened with sweat.

"No need to apologize. I have prepared extra copies, so please take as many as needed." It was as Leone, master of the Merchants' Guild, had predicted. He had instructed Dahlia to make at least three times the number she expected to need, as there would be a chance that many more people would be in attendance. Per his advice, she had spent more time than she would've liked to make enough copies for the worst-case scenario.

Dahlia walked up to the podium and bowed. "My name is Dahlia Rossetti of the Rossetti Trading Company. Thank you very much for allowing me to take up your precious time today. I shall be explaining the details behind the Order of Beast Hunter's procurement of the camp stoves."

Easy to understand and straight to the point was the introduction; it captured everyone's attention.

"On the table in front of you are two types of stoves. As you can see, there are significant improvements to the camp stove in size and weight when

compared to the compact magical stove,” she continued. Everyone in attendance seemed very curious about the functioning examples of both versions, passing them around to handle and examine them. “Flipping over the lid turns it into a skillet. The whole unit weighs about as much as a filled wineskin. Furthermore, it would not be necessary for every individual to carry a camp stove in their kit. When it is necessary to pack light, a pair of knights can share one and alternate cooking on it.”

There were nods of assent in her audience, mainly from Volf, Grato, Randolph, and the other knights. They remained quiet, but Dahlia found comfort simply in having them in the room.

“Wholesome meals in the camp are conducive to healthy, combat-effective knights in the field. On long expeditions, even the hardest knight may find the current rations unsuitable. For example, those with sensitive stomachs or those who have caught colds may have a hard time keeping down food. Not only does the camp stove remediate those deficiencies, it also raises morale—another critical factor of combat effectiveness.” As Dahlia spoke, she looked directly at Gildo, the man who had infuriated her the other day. If there was one person she wanted to understand the significance of the camp stove, it was him.

“Hm. It certainly sounds convincing,” Gildo responded calmly. Contrary to Dahlia’s expectations, there was nary a hint of belligerence or sarcasm in his voice.

“The camp stove even works in locations ill-suited for campfires, such as swamps, grasslands, and deserts or other arid environments. In survival situations, having a heat source to cook foraged food would be vital.”

“There is always the danger of running out of rations—for example, if an expedition drags on longer than expected. In those circumstances, we find ourselves with little choice but to eat the beasts or monsters we’ve hunted,” added Grato. The treasury staff murmured amongst themselves, seemingly sickened and shocked to learn that the Beast Hunters would ever be in such dire straits.

“Each camp stove comes with a fire crystal. Its high endurance means that it will not need frequent replacement, and those capable of fire magic can

recharge them during expeditions if so needed.” Having covered most of the basics, Dahlia took advantage of the lull in her own speech to relax her breathing in preparation for the crucial next phase of the presentation: appealing to the treasury. “May I have everyone turn to the next page of their information packet? At the top are the current field rations and at the bottom are the proposed changes. The cost analysis and difference is as listed.”

“Are you saying the figure would go up *that* significantly?”

“Correct. However, the treasury stands to make significant savings elsewhere.” She proceeded by projecting her voice louder. “By bettering field rations and consequently keeping the knights in good physical health, there is a very great chance of diminishing requests for reassignment, discharge, or early retirement from the Order of Beast Hunters. Furthermore, it will help first to prevent injuries and illnesses but also to reduce recovery time and the associated costs if knights are injured. I believe you’ll find that this would lead to an improvement in human capital and a reduction in overall costs.”

Of everyone in the castle service, Knights from the Order of Beast Hunters retired the earliest and youngest and also transferred to other departments and squads the most often. While Dahlia spoke, Ivano and the assistant had taken out and displayed a large sheet of parchment behind her. “Have a look here.”

“What exactly are we looking at?”

“The circle represents all members of the castle service. The section colored red represents the percentage of members who retire early. For reference, the Mages’ Corps and other orders are in green and blue, respectively.”

“Seeing it in a circle like this is quite different. There seem to be very many who leave the Beast Hunters.”

“It’s easy to tell, isn’t it? There is a lot of red in that chart...”

Unfortunately, the treasury members seemed more engaged with the pie chart than the actual information because, in this world, bar and waffle charts took the place of pies. Dahlia drew everyone’s attention back to the graphs of the number of people who fell ill and were injured, people who left the order sorted by their years of service before departing, and retirement by age. When comparing the Beast Hunters with the First Knights’ Regiment and all the other

orders, the brutally skewed numbers drove the point home. The starkest figures of all pertained to knights past forty years of age.

“Yes, it may seem costly to introduce the camp stove and changes to expeditions, but when considering the long-term effects, scrimping here would be penny-wise but pound-foolish,” Dahlia said, not mincing her words. Ivano and the assistant flipped to the last sheet of parchment. She gritted her teeth briefly before she continued. “This depicts all those who have passed on to the land of honor in the past twenty years. These are the knights from the Order of Beast Hunters and these are the members of the Mages’ Corps, leaving these to represent all other orders.”

“Passing on to the land of honor” was a euphemism for death in action. Every red dot was one Beast Hunter who had fallen; green represented the Mages’ Corps and blue all other orders. There were those who had died defending the kingdom’s borders—even though they were knights of the Order of Beast Hunters—or from accidents. However, the difference in numbers spoke for itself—over three-quarters of the page was covered in red. Understandably, there was little for anyone to say.

“It is deplorable and regrettable that so many lives have been lost,” Dahlia said as she looked over to the people from the treasury. The data spoke for itself; there was no need for her to emphasize anything. But, as numbers meant everything to the treasury, this was where the savings lay. “Solatia and pensions for the bereaved, funeral costs, hiring new recruits, training them until they are ready for active service—whether or not those outweigh the costs of improving the Beast Hunters’ expeditions, I leave to you, gentlemen of the treasury, to determine.”

“I see.” The head treasurer Gildo put on a perfunctory smile. “Chairwoman Rossetti, I now understand the usefulness of the camp stoves. However, surely they can’t be cheap.”

“Allow me to give you a new estimate.” It was a glaring but calculated omission from the packets the treasurers had already received, and now Ivano and the assistant handed out copies of one last sheet of paper. Written on it was the quote for the camp stoves exclusively for the Order of Beast Hunters.

“Is...this correct?”

“Wait, but how...?”

The treasury members looked nonplussed, but the knights were just as antsy.

“This price is solely for the Order of Beast Hunters. I believe this should make for a very persuasive proposal,” she said. The price per unit was quite close to that for the compact magical stove—a number that Ivano had diligently calculated over ten times to ensure that it wouldn’t put them in the red.

“This number is quite a lot smaller than what you had proposed previously. Surely there would be too little profit for the Rossetti Trading Company?”

“I am willing to lay aside considerations of profit in exchange for one concession.”

“Which is?”

Procurement of another product? A recommendation to the royal knights’ purveyors? Or perhaps she wants a title?—their breath was bated; all eyes were on Dahlia.

“We would like to stamp ‘Rossetti’ on the bottom of each stove.”

Gildo furrowed his brows as he tried to understand her reasoning. “You wish to add your name? Whatever for?”

“When powerful monsters appear, regular citizens have no chance of fighting back. It would be just as impossible to run or hide. We pretend that we are safe within the capital, but lest we forget, cities and nations have been razed to the ground by foul beasts. The lives of every subject of the Kingdom of Ordine—myself included—are nestled in the hands of each member of the Order of Beast Hunters.”

Dahlia couldn’t forget the day she had first met Volf. His blood and his wounds—there was no escaping the images in her mind. Later, when she had met the Beast Hunters in their headquarters, she’d seen no pieces of armor unscathed. Every red dot from earlier was a knight, a person. How many human lives had been extinguished? How many tears had been shed by grieving family

and friends? Putting their lives at stake to battle monsters, endure expeditions, suffer through injuries, go through wretched rations and sleepless nights—for whom was all of that? It was for the citizens of the capital and the kingdom, and that included Dahlia. She couldn't fight monsters or protect a single life. But what she could do as a magical toolmaker was make magical tools. However meager or insignificant it may have been, she wanted to give them her support—that was what she wanted to give in exchange.

“To have the members of the Order of Beast Hunters use magical tools with my name on them is the honor for which I implore you.”

The room fell silent, as though taken aback by her bracing voice. Every single knight, along with half of the treasurers, froze up; the other half stared with wide eyes.

The royal knights of the Order of Beast Hunters had no choice but to continue to pursue victory against the monsters. They may have been popular amongst the people, but it couldn't be further from the truth to say they were highly regarded amongst other knights. Unless someone wished to join them, being assigned to the Beast Hunters was considered tantamount to having drawn the short straw. The harsh journeys, towering monsters, numerous mutants, and unpredictable battles were just a handful of reasons why.

No other order could dwarf the Beast Hunters—and especially the Scarlet Armors—when it came to their mortality rate. Illnesses and injuries sustained during expeditions plagued even those who had retired. It was a job spent mostly in the field. Many of the Beast Hunters would never know when they'd lost the last chance to see their family again, to say goodbye to their lovers, to be at their parents' deathbeds.

In spite of all of that, the Beast Hunters were derided as a talentless bunch who couldn't fight other humans but only monsters. It was as if it were only natural that they slew all the monsters and won all their battles. They were raked over the coals if, heavens forbid, they let so much as a single monster get past them.

Even then, this lone magical toolmaker would give, and did give, her appreciation to the Order of Beast Hunters. *She would turn down all profits just to have us use her magical tools. She would even call it her honor.*

Captain Grato stood and placed his right hand on his left shoulder, then bellowed with all his might, “Our sincerest gratitude for your kind words!”

Volf and the vice-captain stood up as well. Momentarily, all the other knights joined them. The captain had given no orders to do so, but they all swiftly put their hands on their shoulders. This salute, the highest token of their respect they could give, was not for a guest of honor or a dignitary but merely some magical toolmaker. Then, Grato—the captain of the Order of Beast Hunters and a marquis—bowed deeply to Dahlia. “We graciously accept your terms for the camp stove.”

“Captain Grato, that is not for you alone to—” But Gildo wasn’t allowed to finish his sentence.

“Whether or not it pertains to our order, surely the treasury cannot ignore how obvious the savings in personnel management are? The cost of this procurement is now well within budget, so where is your problem? If any of you in the treasury department have any objections, speak now. If the numbers are still not good enough for you, then I will ask for an emergency meeting with every order and bureau. I will even go to the king and petition him personally.” Magic fizzled out of his body; it felt as though the oxygen was quickly draining out of the room. Grato must have been barely containing himself from unleashing intimidation.

Surprisingly, it was the deputy secretary of the treasury who spoke up first. “I approve of the procurement of camp stoves for the Order of Beast Hunters. Furthermore, I would like to ask Chairwoman Rossetti to take an even deeper look into the expedition improvement funds.”

“I approve as well, and I would also like to learn more about human capital from the chairwoman,” said the man next to him with a smile. What followed was a chorus of concurrence, with many saying that they would like to hear what other insights Dahlia had.

“Are you sure about these terms, Rossetti?” Grato asked.

“Yes,” she said happily.

“It is my duty to protect the knights under my command. Negligence here and now will only lead to more senseless deaths. If I can make things better for my squad, then I ought to.” Grato’s words felt heavy—and felt too as if they were directed at someone in particular. Though he received no direct response from anyone, Gildo turned his amber gaze onto Grato.

“The contract, Ivano.” With swift strokes of the pen, Grato signed the three documents that Ivano had placed in front of him. Gildo silently refused the captain’s pen and instead brandished his own to do the same. A quick blast with a dryer affixed the ink to the papers before they were passed to the relevant people so that they might put their names down as well.

Dahlia looked on at the men, startled by the nearly anticlimactic speed at which everything was progressing. Behind her, Ivano stowed away the parchment presentation and whispered his congratulations to her.

It was at the Merchants’ Guild last night that they had come up with this plan. Dahlia had recalled how the red bottle of chili juice had had her name plastered on it. As in her previous life, manufactured goods in this world would often have labels. However, the difference here was that they would only say the retailer or store’s name; seldom did they attempt to sell the product or the brand, hence Dahlia’s suggestion to Ivano: marking the bottom of the camp stoves with the Rossetti name would be an advertisement for the company.

When the Beast Hunters went on expeditions, the knights would see that they were using a product from the Rossetti Trading Company and thus raise brand awareness among both the nobility and commoners. In time, the company name would spread to all corners of the capital and then the kingdom, and that would undoubtedly prove to be a good investment.

At the end of her explanation, Ivano had simply sat there dumbfounded. Dahlia had expected him to desperately halt her in her tracks, but his approval came without hesitation, for which she couldn’t have been any more grateful.

When Dahlia quietly breathed a sigh of relief to herself, Grato stepped before her. “Forgive my choice of words, Rosetti, but allow me to surround you.”

It was so out of the blue, she didn't understand what he meant. But just as she was about to ask him to clarify, Grato stood beside her and faced his knights.

"I do not intend to engage in quid pro quo; I am merely speaking out of personal desire. I trust that you have no qualms acting as our witnesses." He instantly dropped to one knee and extended his right palm. His grave eyes burned and glowed red. "I, Grato Bartolone, Captain of the Order of Beast Hunters, hereby ask that the Rossetti Trading Company act as official purveyor to the Order of Beast Hunters, and that Chairman Dahlia Rossetti act as the order's advisor on magical tools."

Three seconds. Three seconds until she understood what Grato meant. Three seconds for her to decide after Volf looked at her with his beautiful beaming smile. Three seconds until she would place her fingers on Grato's outreached palm. Three seconds until someone congratulated her in the midst of her surprise, confusion, and bewilderment.

"Yersh—" An incredible flub. "Yes, I accept."





Once the presentation had concluded, all those in attendance proceeded to a lounge in the central building. “I would now like everyone to join us in a taste test,” Volf announced. For some reason, he had been put in charge of organizing and managing this unplanned meal together.

When she was planning her presentation, Dahlia had also wanted to demonstrate the stoves, but she had left it at that as she knew it wouldn’t be easy to occupy any space within the castle. But right now, it puzzled her to see camp stoves alongside many more compact magical stoves on the tables. There were more stoves than there were people to operate them. She turned around to look at Ivano, who shrugged and shook his head. Apparently, he hadn’t seen this coming either.

“Here we have our current field rations, and here is what we have planned for the future. Please go ahead and try both, after which we would love to collect everyone’s opinions.” Volf was no longer a knight of the Beast Hunters but had completely switched to his Rossetti Trading Company mode. He was so natural and so much better at public speaking that he made Dahlia a little envious.

There were two trays on each table. One contained the modest field rations and the other a smorgasbord of delectable ingredients. In contrast, the wine was in a bottle and served with glasses instead of a wineskin.

The treasury members started with the current rations. Some were horrified by how hard and dry the rye bread was, while others were struggling to bite through the jerky. On the other hand, the knights couldn’t hide their excited smiles; they each took a single bite of the dried provisions before quickly frying up some bacon and sausages. They were bound to cook more, so the smoke and odor were a little concerning. But the good outweighed it all; a meal does wonders to bring people together, and this one was no different.

It felt as though her presentation was now finished, but Dahlia had one last objective to fulfill—she had to make Gildo retract his words.

The day that he’d called her a “lap cat,” Dahlia had found herself terrified for the welfare of the maid who’d dirtied her skirt, so she had asked Volf to look into the matter. She hadn’t wanted to believe that Gildo would do anything

drastic like have the maid exiled from the country. However, Volf's investigation had revealed that not only had the maid wished to leave after the incident, she had been given a large severance package and had safely returned home. Dahlia had realized that she might have been worried for nothing and felt guilty for having made Volf go through so much trouble.

However, now was the perfect time and place to speak to Head Treasurer Gildo. She straightened her posture, braced herself, and approached him. Ivano backed her up, trailing more than a few steps behind. There were knights in the room as well. Even if Gildo refused to retract his statement, Dahlia would be able to stand up for herself, at the very least.

"Looking for me, Chairwoman Rossetti?" Gildo sat alone at a table far away from anyone else, even the servants. It was almost as if he were waiting for her.

"That's correct. The other day, you referred to me as a 'lap cat' and I am imploring you to retract those words."

"Very well. I retract the statement in which I called you a lap cat."

It caught her off guard how nonchalantly he agreed. "I accept your retraction." She hadn't intended to, but she looked into his amber eyes and he smiled ever so subtly.

Gildo stood up and gracefully bowed to her. "Allow me to say how sorry I am as well. As an apology to Chairwoman Dahlia Rossetti, I, Gildovan Diels, resign as head treasurer of the Royal Treasury. Will that suffice?"

"What." Dahlia froze up.

"Would that compensate for the disrespect I caused you with the maid incident?"

She laughed almost involuntarily at his twisted idea of a joke. "What are you talking about..."

A slight toward a commoner like her wouldn't warrant his dismissal, so he must have felt humiliated at having to offer a sincere apology. Gildo might be even more obstinate than she had imagined. And, if he were actually serious, relinquishing his job would do nothing to make her happy. Though she wasn't aware of all that had passed between Grato, Gildo, and Gildo's late brother,

Dahlia was now involved, whether she liked it or not.

Rather than accepting his resignation as an apology, she had a request for him. “As an apology, Lord Diels, could you instead consider this water under the bridge? And, if you could, I would like to have you deal with the Beast Hunters’ finances fairly.”

“You won’t have my post, then?”

“Of course not. Given your youth, I would much rather see your continued success as head treasurer for many years to come. And, um, I understand that I am overstepping boundaries, but I hope you will speak to Captain Grato as well.” If he understood the particulars of the order’s present condition, it might make the topic of budget easier to deal with in the future.

As much as he was scowling, he agreed. “Very well.” He said no more and returned to a seated position.

On the table between them was a cold camp stove; no one had come to operate it. Dahlia noticed that everyone else was maintaining a distance from them, so she turned on the stove herself.

“I wonder what it is you’re planning to do.” Gildo eyed her suspiciously, seemingly baffled that she would begin frying up the assorted foodstuff that had been laid out.

“I was hoping to introduce you to the proposed new field rations. Erm, here is the current food they eat on expeditions.”

From the silver tray that she offered him, he picked up a piece of dry rye bread, then began gnawing determinedly at it. However, the process seemed to inflict more damage to him than the bread; a servant rushed over with glasses of water and wine, worrying that Gildo would choke on the brown lump the knights called food.

Meanwhile, Dahlia cranked up the heat on the stove to grill one of the items from the new menu. As an aroma of savoriness and char wafted into the air, she gingerly transferred the contents of the pan onto a white plate. “Could I have you try some?”

“What is it?”

“Dried barracuda, something that would keep well enough for short expeditions.”

It was quality barracuda, tender and fleshy. There wasn't too much salt, just enough for it to be delicious on its own. It had a mild flavor with no offensive fishiness. Specimens like this one, caught in late summer, were particularly lean and clean-tasting; even an upper-crust man like Gildo should enjoy it.

“Dried barracuda...” A marquis like him was likely not accustomed to fish butterflied, dried, and fried. Gildo stared with apprehension as he began digging in with his knife and fork. Dahlia took his willingness to give it a try as a form of consideration for her. “Surprisingly good, I must say. It would perhaps go better with ale than wine.”

“I recommend trying it with estervino.” Seeing him drop his guard a bit was enough to make her blurt that out. It might just be that they both fancied their drink.

“Estervino would be especially good? I see. Chairwoman Rossetti, if you had wine and dined us beforehand, you might have been able to get the full price you had initially asked for.”

“Oh. So that was a choice too...” Life drained out of her eyes as she looked into the distance. If only she had remembered that every presentation needed to start with an impactful hook, she wouldn't have been so stressed with preparing everything. Not to mention, she'd flubbed her response to Grato's offer and *nobody* had laughed—just thinking about it made her want to bolt out of the castle and run back to the tower. Perhaps she'd find Volf there to chat about the day's events, have some barracuda, and sip on some dry estervino.

“I jest,” Gildo said. “How about you allow me to personally cover your losses?”

“Respectfully, I refuse. I wouldn't want to lose the chance to have my name on the stoves. I was just thinking that perhaps you were right in that it would have been more effective to give everyone a taste of the food first.”

“It may very well have had the opposite effect; we might have focused too much on the food and consequently less on your words.”

“I see...” Dahlia nodded along. “Perhaps I should have had the treasury members partake in the current rations while I presented.”

“You’d have us eat *this* while you spoke? No, somehow, I doubt that would have helped your case. Separating the presentation and the demonstration was the way to go. I should mention that I was very impressed by how easy it was to understand your graphs...” Gildo continued on, and before they knew it, the two of them were discussing the finer points of presentation methods, document packets, and the data in the graphs. All the while, he tucked in and polished off the remaining fish, then found Ivano delivering them another serving. As Dahlia began grilling the second piece, he asked, “This barracuda—it keeps well, you said?”

“As it is, it should keep for two days. Bundled up in a bag and kept under ice crystals, it should keep for ten. Uh, of course, there are bound to be those who do not have fish, so having some jerky and other ingredients on hand would be beneficial. Even the weary and the sick should be able to take in some nutrition this way.”

“I see. Judging by your choice of words, I presume you have heard about my brother?”

“Um... Forgive me for not knowing what to say, but please know that I sympathize with you.”

“Just today, I heard about your father’s sudden passing and your circumstances afterward as well. I, well, erm...I empathize. It must be hard.” Gildo didn’t say whom he had heard that from. What was plain was his pain and his grief at unexpectedly losing a loved one—not unlike her own. “Tell me, Chairwoman Rossetti, do you have any desires for the future?”

“Hmm. I hope that the Beast Hunters will eat better, sleep better, and that every one of them will be able to go home safely at the end of the day.”

Gildo halted the movement of his hand before the wine glass reached his lips. Implicitly, he had been asking about her future ambitions, like money or status, which Dahlia had failed to grasp—all she cared about right now was the timing of when she should flip the barracuda. As she watched the pan intently, her red hair fluttered in the breeze against the backdrop of blue skies.

“I see. So you’re the Beast Hunters’ ‘elegance of summer’?”

“No, please don’t! I am far from worthy of that title!” Dahlia objected with all her might at Gildo’s shocking choice of words. “Elegance of summer” was a turn of phrase to describe a beauty whom everyone adored. She found it terribly uncomfortable that he would exaggerate like this. “Oh, I know! There is a nation I know of that uses a phrase along the lines of ‘I’m so busy, I’d borrow a cat’s help,’ so maybe likening me to a cat is more fitting.”

The whole “lap cat” business was still a fresh wound for both parties, yet Dahlia had blabbered the first thing that came to her panicking mind. She was petrified—what if Gildo took it as a snide remark? Dahlia looked up at Gildo to find him with eyes bulging. He covered his mouth but ultimately failed to hold back his guffaw. “Oh, you’re good. But one thing is for certain—you may be as charming as one, but you are no mere house cat. Perhaps it would be more apt to call you a lion, the protector of the order?”

“Oh, I’m a lion now?!” she roared in pain. Dahlia had never encountered “lion” as an entry in the noble’s handbook. Was the man in front of her praising her? Disparaging her? Being sarcastic with her? She had no clue.

Gildo couldn’t stop his laughter, and judging by the tears in his eyes, neither would anyone else be able to for a good while.



“Kudos to Chairwoman Rossetti for being able to get the retraction from Gildo. I’m impressed.”

“Not just that, she even tore down his walls with the barracuda.”

“That goes beyond just determination...” Volf said with an awkward smile in response to his vice-captain and a grizzled knight. He had been listening intently to Dahlia and Gildo’s conversation, all the while with his strengthening skill activated. He would have been at her side, but Ivano was already standing by behind her and to her side. Randolph, too, had been sitting and waiting at the table behind Gildo before Dahlia even got there. Right now, Grato was moving to a table close by to check on them as well.

Until a moment ago, all Volf had managed to do was offer some food and

make small talk with the treasury members—people he didn’t really get along with. Guido, his brother, had given him a few tips on how to break the ice with them—*introduce yourself, listen to what they have to say, and remember their statuses and interests*, he had said, but Volf found little success making acquaintances so easily. Hell, it was harder than fighting monsters.

Guido was leagues ahead of him in tactfulness. He’d written a letter to Grato recommending “bringing more knights to the presentation so as to create a less nerve-racking environment for Chairwoman Rossetti.” Furthermore, he’d contacted the deputy secretary of the treasury and asked him to bring along younger hires to the meeting. Even the use of this lounge they had right now was Guido’s handiwork. This morning, Volf had been told that it was unoccupied, so he’d borrowed the space. But Volf knew it was no coincidence that the lounge was unoccupied; it was his brother who’d cleared the place out for him.

It seemed that Guido had every single detail under control to ensure the presentation and procurement of the camp stoves would be successful. However, having this live demonstration had allowed the treasury to experience just how useful the product in question was, and so Volf was very grateful for the opportunity. Guido had spoken to Grato about the new ingredients, and as they didn’t have many of the camp stoves on hand, they’d collected and borrowed compact magical stoves from the barracks—apparently they’d been a hit ever since Volf started using his own stove. And now the taste testing party was in full swing in the lounge.

“Etching her name into the bottom of each stove... There’s a certain romance to that, isn’t there?” mumbled the grizzled knight with a mouth full of bacon.

“Oh, that’s for sure. Wasn’t it a custom right after the kingdom was founded that when a man went to war, his woman would embroider her name onto the back of his shirt? I think it means ‘I’ll be behind you and support you while you’re in battle’ or something like that?”

“That’s right. When my wife and I first started courting, she stitched her name in tiny letters onto the back of my undershirt.”

“That’s so sweet. How enviable.”

As the two knights spoke, Volf had been grilling some salt-cured kraken but suddenly stopped.

“All of us Beast Hunters sure are lucky to have Chairwoman Rossetti’s support. I’m forever thankful,” Griswald said cheerfully.

But Volf didn’t have much to say. “Right,” he muttered.

An awkward silence fell on them for a while before it was broken by the grizzled knight offering Volf some red wine. “Volf, you sure keep some scary ladies around you.”

“She’s just a friend. But scary? Well, I suppose what’s scary is how she puts up with and bottles up everything.” He’d only seen her angry when she was being teased—and that time when he sparred with Marcello. “Only” was probably not the right word; now that he thought about it, he had likely caused her more trouble over these few months than he would have liked.

“If she can put up with you, then I suppose she really is a lion,” Griswald needed.

Volf looked over to her again. The Dahlia who was so awe-inspiring when presenting was nowhere to be found; right now, she was trying her damndest to pry free the barracuda, which was stuck to the grill grate, and flip it over. Her beautiful red hair was absolutely radiant in the sunlight. Joy welled up from the bottom of his heart as he replied to his vice-captain, “Rather, she’s just as her name suggests—Dahlia is the elegance of summer.”

Interlude: The Headstrong & Well-Connected

Grato proceeded to the head treasurer's office after the meal between the two departments had concluded. After dismissing both parties' attendants from the room, he retrieved a stack of papers from his chestnut-brown leather portfolio. Now, splayed across the high-gloss black desktop were four letters of recommendation. "Recommendations that the Rossetti Trading Company begin dealing with the castle. The signatories are Duke Gastoni, the masters of the Merchants' Guild and Tailors' Guild, and the vice-guildmaster of the Adventurers' Guild—I'd like to think that even you would be powerless to object." The letter closest to Gildo was the one from Gastoni, signed not by the former duchess but by her son, the incumbent duke.

"Why didn't you submit these before the meeting?" Politeness went by the wayside as Gildo returned an impassive question. "If you had, you could've gotten me axed from my position... Never mind; I'll apologize to them afterward. I got to hear a few things too." But this man sitting across from Grato—someone who, once upon a time, had been considered a friend—couldn't hide his displeasure and refused to look Grato in the eye.

Grato gritted his teeth, steeled himself, and stood up. "Gildo, I failed to protect your brother and I apologize. I do not expect your forgiveness."

"I received a simple apology like that in the form of a letter a while after his funeral, didn't I?"

"I apologize for the insolence of failing to attend the funeral as well."

"Just drop it. Sit. Oh, that's right, you didn't go to his funeral. What, were you afraid of my reproach?"

Grato sat back down just as Gildo had calmly ordered him, but this time, it was the captain who averted his eyes. He sat there silently, trying his best to not let out any words, but failed in the end. "The day we returned, we were forced into isolation on the outskirts of town. There we were for eight days."

“You fell ill? This is news to me.”

“Necrosis. I was rotting from the inside out—the result of a monster’s slow-acting poison. A few other knights were afflicted too. Because it was infectious, not only were we forced to isolate, but we were kept quiet with a gag order in order to avoid causing panic in the capital.”

“Why didn’t you say anything after the gag order was lifted?”

“On the eighth day, I visited to apologize and to deliver a letter...” Grato trailed off and took a moment to collect himself. “But your mother refused it. ‘I understand that it was part of his duty, but allow us to grieve first. Let me contact you before you come to see us again,’ she asked of me. That was the promise we exchanged.”

“This is news to me too. I suppose shortly after, mother fell sick and, well...” Gildo stopped in the middle of the sentence and sucked in his lips.

Grato still hadn’t received her permission and now never could. “Yes. And I fled like a coward until today.”

“What a ridiculous promise you’ve held yourself to, you blithering idiot! You haven’t changed one bit since our school days, have you? You never express yourself properly, Grato, by words or by writing!” He spat out his words, not even bothering to affix a title to Grato’s name.

But Grato sat there and took it—there wasn’t a single word that Gildo had said that was wrong. “You’re right. If it hadn’t been for you helping me study before every exam, I wouldn’t have graduated at all. Nothing has really changed since then.” Grato was finally able to look up at him.

Gildo’s once-glimmering blond hair was now streaked with white. His amber eyes were a tone darker than they had been. The wrinkles on his face turned his formerly cheerful appearance into one of fussiness. Those changes came to the body with the passing of the years, and it was no different for Grato.

“My brother joined the Order of Beast Hunters because he looked up to you. But at the end of the day, he was still a royal knight who stepped onto the front line of his own free will; your apologies—and your pity—are unneeded.” Gildo’s words were a knight’s and not a bureaucrat’s, and they were reminiscent of the

time when they had been students still sparring with training swords. He had always been serious and upfront, hence his recommendation for the position of head treasurer.

But that was exactly why there was something that didn't quite make sense to Grato. "I have to ask: budget aside, why did you drag Rossetti into things? That isn't like you."

"The numbers were what they were. We looked into the market price of the regular compact stoves. If there's room to shrink that number, then it's the treasury's job to do so. But as for why I dragged her into things..." Gildo hesitated for a moment. "Well, it was meant to be a final warning."

"A final warning? What do you mean?"

"I had thought about stepping down as head treasurer. It was a good opportunity to do so."

"At our age? We're hardly that old. And what do you mean by a warning?"

"Tall, redhead, fair skin, itty-bitty waist—fits your tastes to a T."

"What? Just what are you on about?" Grato's eyes flickered. He couldn't deny it, but it didn't seem like the time or place to be discussing this matter.

"Dahlia Rossetti—a young woman without any titles who recently became the chairwoman of a company that all of a sudden is frequenting the castle. The Scalfarotto family's youngest son, infamously known as the 'Heartbreaker,' is her company's guarantor. When that young lady came to the castle alone, the marquis and captain of the Order of Beast Hunters ordered cake usually reserved for the royal family and had served it on Esterland porcelain usually reserved for dignitaries. He even summoned her to his office and cleared the rest of his afternoon's schedule, despite the fact that her visit was supposed to be nothing more than the delivery of a few documents. That maid then came back to my department and kicked up a fuss with her maid friend."

Grato's head pounded at the unexpected answer. It meant that this was all his fault. "I admit that was an oversight on my part. But do you mean to say that the treasury listens in to even what the maids are gossiping about?"

"But of course. If our department makes a single misstep, heads will roll—and

I mean that in the most literal sense. We have informants in the mix. From what our maid heard, the Scalfarotto boy has made a habit of mooching meals from the Green Tower. Things like that, I turn a blind eye. But Grato, you ought to run a thorough check on the employees and maids under you. If people have unsavory ideas about your squad, it affects more than just your squad members.”

“Sorry. I should be keeping a tighter rein.” All of the employees and maids—and their personal guarantors—had been vetted before they were allowed into the castle, and Grato had placed all his faith in the process. As far as thanking Dahlia for her efforts, he had done it without exercising due diligence and without considering outsiders’ opinions. Grato had let down his guard just because he was within the confines of the Beast Hunters’ territory. He hadn’t even considered that word of his guests and knights would travel around because of gossipy maids.

“It’s easier to control the spread of rumors when I’m the one spreading the rumors. That’s why I had the maid mess up Chairwoman Rossetti’s clothes there and then. If she couldn’t, then neither could I keep hush about her leaking such sensitive information, nor would she get her severance pay.”

“But what reason did you have to do that?”

“Twofold, I suppose. Firstly, the nasty rumor of a warning was to tip the scales in my favor with regards to the camp stove deal. Secondly, I expected her to smarten up and keep you at arm’s length. I should’ve been able to pay for it all with my resignation, regardless of what kind of backing she had or if any protests had been made through the Beast Hunters. I just hadn’t expected her to charge ahead and bring the fight to me.” That last sentence brought a smirk to his face.

But Grato couldn’t understand why. Instead, he stared. “So it was because of you that no rumors had actually circulated. Though I still don’t understand *why*. Why did you have to go that far? It isn’t as though any criticisms brought to me would hurt you in any shape or form.”

Gildo hesitated. “I don’t recall saying it was all just for you. The Order of Beast Hunters is our nation’s shield; bad optics on the part of its captain would make

budgeting all the more a hassle. I am used to being everyone's enemy as the head treasurer, so another grudge or two means little. I mean, not to say our past didn't factor into this."

"Why do it in such a roundabout way? You could've just warned me personally, couldn't you?"

"I would have if I could have!" Gildo snarled.

In the years since their student days, never had he seemed more like his old self than now. As Grato thought back on it, Gildo had always been rather headstrong, but they weren't so unlike—each man had been unable to reach out to the other, and it had haunted them both.

"Plus, you always leap to and act on wrong conclusions!" Whatever mask Gildo had hidden behind had now fallen; his frustration was written on his face. "And what was with you today, surrounding Rossetti on your high horse like that? Don't you go doing things that could trouble Dalila."

"What?! That's ridiculous! Act your age!" Upon the mention of Dalila's name, Grato couldn't help but raise his voice too. "That was me thanking her, plain and simple! If I hadn't done that, I have no doubt that your treasury men would have her head! And are you still so deeply bothered that your dear childhood friend is my wife?"

"Bothered?! Inconceivable! I grew up with Dalila *and* she's my cousin; it would be inhumane of me if I didn't worry for her well-being. Have you forgotten that I know *all* about your relationships during your college days?"

"That was ages ago..." It wasn't as though Gildo didn't have a point, but that was then and this was now. Grato failed to stay composed, so he instead pressed one hand to his brow. Gildo was cousin to Grato's wife Dalila. As was so often the case among cousins of the opposite sex, Gildo was like an older brother to her and as protective as one too. Grato remembered that right before he and Dalila were married, Gildo had warned Grato that he would personally murder him if he so much as made her cry. Grato simply hadn't expected that Gildo would still be like this after all these years.

"But now I know that I didn't have anything to worry about—she's too far out of your reach."

“How rude. What, are you bitter about how she made you take back your words?”

“Not at all. I offered to resign from my position as an apology, but she simply laughed and refused it outright.”

“You did *what?! So* when you asked why I didn’t submit these before the meeting...”

Gildo snorted. “All Rossetti wanted instead was for the fiasco to be water under the bridge, for the treasury to correctly allocate budget for your order, for me to keep at my job because I’m still young, and for me to talk to you. Then, when I asked her what goals she had, she said she simply wanted the Beast Hunters to eat better, sleep better, and get home safely. She’s far too clever. I can’t get a good read on her.”

“I don’t blame you; I don’t even think that’s possible at all...”

“Not only do I owe her one now, she has even cut off my retreat. Just who is backing her?”

“Please don’t make me tell you.” Grato heaved an exaggerated sigh. A pair of amber eyes narrowed in his direction but turned away shortly after.

“I’ve waved the white flag already; I have no intentions of fighting her. Just thinking of all the damage I’d receive and the apologizing I’d have to do makes my head throb. Hell, resigning *would* be the easy way out...” He clasped his hands atop his desk and then placed his head on top as though it really was aching. Even for a viscount like Gildo, facing Duke Gastoni and the various guildmasters would be too much to handle.

“I’m inclined to agree. But remember, it’s all water under the bridge now, so use me as an excuse.”

“I’ll have to come up with something good, that’s for sure. Anyway, tell me—how does this lead back to me? Is it Duke Gastoni, or is it somebody else that we have in common?”

“You’re sure it leads back to you, then? I take you for a man of your word, Gildo.”

“Sure. I would go to the temple to sign a magical contract if that’s what you need from me,” he said offhandedly.

“Dahlia Rossetti stands alone.”

He kept his head on top of his folded hands for a moment longer. “Excuse me?” he asked as he looked up. Gildo was a smart man; his delay was less because he didn’t understand and more because he didn’t *want to* understand.

“Rossetti has no patrons. One could say that she has Volfred beside her as well as various guilds that she has forged connections with through the Merchants’ Guild, but that would really be stretching it. She merely said whatever came to her—that she wanted you to keep your job, wanted you to do well, wanted the Beast Hunters to get home safely... From what I can see, the woman has no ulterior motives or ambitions for any sort of merits for herself. As for wanting us to have a chat...” Grato hesitated to continue. “It’s embarrassing that someone young enough to be my daughter would offer her good offices.”

“What a baffling entity...”

“Make good on your word, Gildo,” Grato said, sneering, at which Gildo loudly clicked his tongue.

“Whatever. I’m just glad that this won’t come back to bite me. As soon as you and the vice-captain recommend Rossetti for her barony, my deputy and I will endorse her. When I go to apologize to Duke Gastoni, I’ll get his recommendation too.”

“You sure work quickly.”

“Oh, shut it. You just work slowly. I’ll get her barony in a flash to show you how well connected I am.”

“You really are just as headstrong as you always were,” Grato muttered with a grin, but Gildo ignored it. They may have been slightly closer than before, but to expect that they could still speak like old friends would be setting himself up for disappointment.

Even in elementary school, Grato had never been the studious type, but he’d

made up for his shortcomings with Gildo's help. When he fell asleep during a lesson, Gildo had been there to review the material with him. When he messed up an assignment, Gildo was there to teach him how to do it properly. Every year, Grato would barely scrape by and advance to the next grade, which inevitably led to his father chastising him, saying that he'd never catch up to Gildo.

Before Grato knew it, the two of them had become constant companions in study and play, despite their differences in temperament. When the two friends got chewed out by their teachers, Gildo would be fuming that he'd gotten dragged into Grato's antics. And even though Grato didn't really learn from his mistakes, Gildo had always been by his side. Gildo, by nature, was a knight. He had an innate sense of chivalry, justice, and honor. He would stand up to any wrongdoing, be it against older students or even teachers. That was the type of person he was, and Grato reckoned that's why he had stuck with him through their schooldays.

On the other hand, Gildo would find himself clashing with others because he was so upright—and upfront. If someone was about to say something that would cross the line, Gildo would poke his nose in and stop them. When a conversation got awkward, he'd kick up a fuss and inject some energy. If someone picked a fight with Grato, Gildo would back him up. It wasn't long before the duo was treated as partners in crime, and as a result, Gildo had kept complaining to Grato to stop dragging him into trouble.

When the pair entered high school, Gildo had enrolled and excelled in both chivalric and civil service studies. However, Grato had been good at only the practical portion of his chivalric studies—namely martial arts and equestrianism—and once again had scraped by with barely passing grades. But he absolutely wouldn't have Gildo besting him at sword fighting, so Grato had secretly studied at home under a private instructor.

It didn't matter how much effort Grato put into his academics; he always spun in circles and his father always reprimanded him for his grades. It was a given that Grato would be compared to his younger brother, who had been an excellent student, and if not him, then Gildo. As Grato grew older, the strife between him and his father had become all the more frequent and intense,

leading him to stray off his intended path. At one point, he had even run away from home, leaving the succession of the marquisate to his brother. It wasn't his father or his teachers who had grabbed him by the collar and dragged him back to school but Gildo. It was he, and only he, whose attitude toward Grato had never changed. As grateful and happy as Grato was, his family and instructors had ordered him not to cause trouble for Gildo. Grato had begun seeing himself as someone who held back Gildo, the model student, and as someone who only received Gildo's kindness because he was weak and ineffectual.

One day, crushed under a mountain of guilt and self-pity, Grato had said to Gildo, "I'm sorry for everything up till now. Rid yourself of the burden that is me." He had expected a thunderous response, but he was instead met with deafening silence. When Gildo had then turned around and walked away, Grato had thought that his wish had come true and had tried to convince himself that it would be for the better, but he knew he couldn't possibly bear it. But just when he looked up to repress the tears—

"And just what the hell are burdens between friends, you dolt?!" With the wrathful voice came a bucket of ice water hurled from the second floor. It didn't take long before Gildo himself had stomped back down the stairs to personally deliver a few swift punches.

Predictably, the result was a great big tussle. Both boys had strengthened their bodies, and combined with their chivalric training and youthful fervor, they had made havoc of the turf and planters in the courtyard. It had taken countless punches, kicks, a bucket of icy water, and a surprisingly powerful blast of water that sent them flying before the boys calmed down.

The water cannon—originally designed to wash the walls of the school building—had been fired by the magical tools instructor. "Behave yourselves! What are you two, some sort of garden pest hell-bent on destroying all the greenery?!" Being screamed at by a teacher who had always been a calm and gentle figure managed to shut the boys up. They were even made to sit properly in the Esterland style in the hallway while the instructor berated them for quite some length of time.

The two had expected to face expulsion, but perhaps because of Gildo's usual

good behavior, they'd been spared and were instead made to weed the garden for an hour a day for a month as punishment. In addition, each of them had to write a letter of apology. Grato had thought expulsion would be preferable, considering the eyes on them as they tended to the courtyard, but picking weeds as he shot the breeze with his best friend hadn't been so bad after all. Plus, he had Gildo's help writing the letter anyway.

As it transpired, Gildo hadn't simply turned around and walked away but had instead gone looking for a student capable of wielding ice magic. Grato had said that he couldn't believe Gildo would actually do that, but all Gildo had had to say in return was that he had to ensure Grato would "cool his head." The bad company had shared a big smile and a heartier guffaw.

After high school, Grato had found himself with no choice but to succeed his family's title, yet what he truly wanted for himself was to join the Order of Beast Hunters. He was keenly aware of the tragedy that monsters brought to the people, and so he wanted to wield the family heirloom, the magical blade Ash-Hand, in battle.

Gildo had been in a similar boat. He had striven to join the First Knights' Regiment, but his civil service grade was simply too good for the castle's treasury department to pass him over. As he hemmed and hawed, his choice had been taken from him—a letter signed by the King of Ordine commissioned him by name. There had been absolutely nothing that he or his family could do to gainsay the crown. The following day, Gildo had trudged up to Grato's estate without so much as a warning or any servant to accompany him. What he had brought instead were two bottles of firewater of unparalleled proof—one for each of them.

"I wanted to be a knight!" Gildo had roared out as he pressed his hand against his brow, ineffectively damming his tears, which in turn made Grato bawl too. The pair had grumbled through the night about all of their problems as they drank themselves into a stupor. When they awoke to the worst hangovers of their young lives (which required a priest to cure), their mothers gave them the longest talking-to they had ever received. Worrying their mothers had been enough to teach them a lesson. The boys then discussed among themselves whether it was their fate to be nagged by women, how talking back to women

would only prolong the process, and how women were all the more frightening when scorned.

After that, Grato had managed to win over his family, leave the succession to his younger brother, and join the Beast Hunters. Gildo had entered the treasury and become a rising star, surmounting the paperwork he was buried under. Even though both young men had become busier with work, they'd still found time to drink together. There had now been more topics to discuss and more problems to complain about, but their time together was still just as fun.

Before long, Gildo's younger brother had begun to tag along with them from time to time. He was a few years younger, but he and Gildo looked like one and the same young man. He'd studied chivalric studies in high school, loved stories about monsters, and looked up to the Order of Beast Hunters too. Moreover, he was even more agreeable and obedient than Gildo. When he had first mentioned that he wished to join the order, Gildo had immediately put the idea down, leaving Grato with no room to argue for either side. However, Gildo's brother had eventually worn both Gildo and his family down.

The day that his brother was officially to become Grato's subordinate, Gildo had come to him with a bow most sincere, pleading, "Grato, can I trust you with my brother's life?" Grato had responded in the affirmative and had gone on to protect the boy in expeditions against monsters. But Grato had failed to notice that Gildo's anemic brother was not eating well enough and had failed to prevent the boy from falling off his horse.

A moment ago, Gildo had said that he didn't need Grato's apology or pity, but the truth was that Grato had indeed been the leader of the squad and therefore had broken the promise he'd made to his friend. That was a burden he would have to carry on his shoulders for the remainder of his life.

"I'll just be speaking aloud to myself," Gildo said after clearing his throat, interrupting Grato's trip down memory lane. "I shall recalculate the Beast Hunters' budget and we'll find a lot of leeway in the accounts. I would also be open to suggesting at our next meeting a budget increase that would give your squad all the dried barracuda you could ever want."

“That’s a generous soliloquy, but what are you asking in return?”

“How about a nice bottle of red?” he said, sneering. When Grato had had his help before every exam, that was all Gildo would ever ask for—always in the same words and with the same expression.

It brought the slightest pang to Grato. Ever since blacking out that one fateful day, they had drunk together many times afterward. They’d chat about matters serious, silly, and meaningless. They’d always have more to chat, laugh, argue, and fight about, but that all could be washed down with another gulp of the drink. The thought of never being able to clink glasses again with the man he had called his best friend lingered in his heart. “I can feel my wallet getting lighter if it’s to be a bottle of your choice.”

“Your griping sours my red wine, so be quiet and I’ll treat you to your favorite white.”

Seeing Gildo averting his gaze, Grato froze up for the slightest moment before breaking into a broad smile reminiscent of the time when they had still been two youths.

This Magical Toolmaker Named Dahlia

Purveyor for the royal knights' Order of Beast Hunters and their advisor on magical tools—those were the roles that their captain Grato had offered, and Dahlia had accepted. As head of a trading company, she had expected to supply the order with merchandise, get a clear picture of their needs, and consult them on magical tools. However, when she'd checked in with the Merchants' Guild, the usually calm guildmaster Leone had laughed hard enough to set his white beard aquiver. Even Gabriella had laughed at her. Before Dahlia could ask why, Leone had recommended that she report to Forto at once, and so to the Tailors' Guild she and Ivano went.

Upon their arrival, Forto's first words were, "Congratulations. I hope you will allow Lucia and me to create the dress you wear to your entitling ceremony." As the wheels in Dahlia's head spun with no traction, Ivano launched a barrage of questions at the tailor and then summarized the situation for her.

The role of purveyor was exactly as it sounded—the Rossetti Trading Company would now be given priority when the Order of Beast Hunters was to make any purchase. This position meant that they would also be protected by the knights. If the company were to face any interference or be pressured into any one-sided deals, the order could protest or resolve the situation on their behalf. However, the advisory role was honorary; what it really boiled down to was that it was an endorsement for Dahlia's barony.

As baroness, she would surely be safe from either commoners or other nobles taking advantage of her in business. After all, she'd earned her title from her meritorious actions toward the Order of Beast Hunters, and *their* leader was the marquis Grato Bartolone. Dahlia understood that when Grato had said that they would "surround" her, he meant that they'd have her back.

Ordinarily, it took about one year after one received an endorsement for barony before the title was formally conferred, as there was an assessment period in between. Thus, when Ivano was finished with his explanation, Forto

gave her a soft smile and said, “We’ll see the birth of Baroness Rossetti by next year.” Dahlia’s knees almost gave out when she heard those words, though there was no denying that she had wished to get the title sooner or later so that she might stand proudly by Volf’s side.

Lucia hadn’t fully understood the situation (if at all), but she couldn’t contain herself when she found out that she would have the chance to make Dahlia a long, formal dress. She had jumped on the rough sketches right away, patience be damned. Lastly, Ivano gave her his congratulations as well. Both he and Dahlia had eyes that screamed of exhaustion. What was to come was daunting.

When she made her way back home with mind and soul barely intact, Dahlia had spied a very fine black-painted coach parked before the Green Tower. It had been a delivery for a charming bouquet of white and pink flowers, a box of flower-shaped confectionery, and a *very* fancy golden tin of black tea.

Just as she had gotten excited about receiving such wonderful gifts from Volf, the name on the included letter turned her pale—they were from Gildovan Diels, the head treasurer whom she’d said goodbye to just a few hours ago. He had written a short but polite apology, saying that he was “awaiting the day when I will see you again”; Dahlia doubled over her desk.

That night, Volf had swung by with a bottle of estervino. It wasn’t intended to be a proper celebration, but Dahlia had grilled dried barracuda, made a spicy okra stir-fry, and brought out some dishes she had made ahead of time to go with their drink. She had taken the opportunity to gripe all about her day—how nervous she had been about the presentation, how she had flubbed her line when accepting the captain’s proposals, how Gildo had called her a lion, what had happened at the two guilds, and the letter she had just received. Volf had lent her an ear and consoled her. When he was about to leave, he had said to her that “You’re just Dahlia, Dahlia,” which gave her the mental fortitude to face the future.

Meanwhile, in the present, Dahlia received her first assignment as the Beast Hunters’ advisor. Grato had asked her if she could train the knights on the handling of the camp stove, to which she agreed. She was accompanied by Ivano today to the riverside in the forest not far west of the capital, where she

and Volf had first shared a meal together.

After arriving with the knights and their wagons, Dahlia first spread sheets of waterproof cloth on the ground and laid out enough camp stoves for everyone with some extras to spare and a number of compact magical stoves as well. Four or five people would form a group and get some hands-on experience with their new equipment.

The dazzling summer sun scattered through the canopy as the breeze was cooled by the river—it was truly the perfect day for a picnic. Dahlia gave out some simple instructions before the knights sat down on the tarps and began working the camp stoves. A quick scan showed that none of them seemed to be struggling; rather, many of them were even humming to themselves as they worked.

“So far, so good, everyone?” she asked, directing her gaze at Volf, who was part of the group that she was sitting with.

His golden eyes smiled in a peculiar way. “For the past few days, we’ve been alternating and learning how to use the stoves on our training grounds in the castle. We even got the Mages’ Corps guys to join us.”

“Then I suppose I’m not really needed here today?”

“No, that’s not true. Not everyone has had the chance to try them out and neither have we gotten the knack yet. Besides, we were told to stop practicing on the training grounds.”

“Was it a nuisance for everyone else?”

“It was genuinely part of training, so they couldn’t really call us a nuisance. It’s just that we switched spots every time we went out to use the stoves, and it *just so happened* that the wind carried the scent toward the pencil pushers and treasurers. On our third time, they both politely asked us to stop and so we did.”

Was that some new kind of harassment or something? Sure, there had been a bit of friction between them and the treasury just a few days ago, but it was almost as if the Order of Beast Hunters held a grudge against the treasury and the rest of the bureaucrats. “Now, why would you do that there?”

“Oh, you know. Coincidence. The training grounds were free. And of course, we felt bad for troubling them, so to bury the hatchet, the vice-captain and I visited them with compact magical stoves, bacon, jerky, and ground coffee. We knew the treasurers and clerks are prone to pulling all-nighters when they have to settle accounts, so we thought having some supplies on hand would be indispensable for them.”

“Wait a minute. Ivano was ecstatic because we received a large order of the compact stoves out of the blue. Was that...”

Volf had the cheekiest grin. “Well, isn’t that good news, Dahlia!”

The Rossetti Trading Company would have been much better off with a third employee. Perhaps Volf wouldn’t mind joining her and Ivano instead; after all, being a Scarlet Armor was awfully dangerous. It crossed her mind for a brief moment before Dahlia forcefully shook off the ridiculous thought. “Thank you,” she said in a voice slightly quieter than usual.

Despite the fact that it was a training day, their menu today was rather extravagant. There was rye bread for cheese fondue, bacon, ham, and eggs, among various dried foods. There was even a soup that was handily made by cooking together water, dried vegetables, and loads of jerky, and flavored with not just salt but even premixed spices. Furthermore, as though to represent captured wild game or monsters, there was a mountain of raw meat so beautifully marbled that there could be no doubt this was no camping practice but a celebration party.

“Excuse us, Chairwoman Rossetti?”

“Yes, how can I help?” Both Dahlia and Ivano walked toward the group that had called them over to answer their questions.

“The dried fish is, like, *really* dry and tough, nothing like the one from last time.”

“Try grilling it hot and fast. It should not need all that much time to cook thoroughly.” There were a few tricks to cooking dried fish. Low and slow would prevent it from getting too burnt but also turn the dried fish even drier.

“How about the meat? The outside is all burnt, but it’s still raw in the middle.”

“For thicker slices of meat, it might be a good idea to get a good char on one side, flip it over, then put a lid on top to let it steam up a little.”

“I see, I see! That way it won’t turn to a lump of coal.” There was trial and there was error, but everyone in the squad had big smiles on their faces.

“The dipping sauce for the meat is tremendous. Would it be possible to get the recipe afterward?”

“On the last page of the instruction manual, there should be three recipes for dipping sauces there. This one is the first one.”

“Oh, is that right? Much appreciated. I think I’ll give it a shot at home too. My son would love the flavor, I think.”

Seeing the father with such a warm expression, neither Dahlia nor Ivano could hide their smiles. Then, after making the rounds once, they headed back to the group they had initially sat down with.

At a tarp farther away from Dahlia, Dorino and his group started to dig into grilled salt-cured kraken, vegetable soup, and fondue. “Order up!” he announced. He and Randolph often ate with Volf, so they were accustomed to cooking with portable stoves.

“I’m not dreaming, right? We’ll get to eat this stuff on expeditions from now on?”

“Yeah, that’s right. It really is a treat.”

The knights looked blissful as they savored their hot lunch.

“Oh, man. Who knew bread dipped into melted cheese could be *this* good?”

“That salt kraken is so good; you wouldn’t believe it’s a field ration.” Dorino and the others enthused about their meal, while Randolph nodded vigorously.

Then, Dorino dropped to one knee and clasped his hands—how knights prayed. “This is actually a picnic party, isn’t it? Thank you for blessing us.”

“I feel you, Dorino. We really ought to thank the heavens above.”

“What are you talking about? Isn’t it obvious I’m praying to Ms. Dahlia?”

People all around shared a hearty laugh.

Speaking of whom, Dahlia, Volf, Ivano, and vice-captain Griswald were on the topic of the Beast Hunters' work. On their sheet of waterproof cloth lay three empty wineskins.

"I was wondering why the other orders looked down on the Beast Hunters," asked Ivano.

"I'd have to say it's more or less because the First and Second Knights' Regiment is where all the people from high-ranking families enlist," responded Griswald.

"We don't really fight on horseback or as cavalry since we're up against monsters. They don't think we have what it takes to take on other people either." Volf and Griswald both looked defeated when they answered.

"I'd say that monsters are even more frightful. If the other knights do not think the Beast Hunters are all that, then they should join you on expeditions to prove their mettle." Dahlia couldn't hold her tongue. She couldn't get Volf's bloodstained visage out of her mind.

"That's not a bad idea, actually. They'd get a firsthand view of just how rough it can get."

"Perhaps you could try acting subservient to the other party, flattering them, and then you could ask them to join an expedition under the guise of borrowing their help. If you set them up like that, they couldn't afford *not* to go."

"Huh. I've never thought of doing it like that." Griswald stroked his chin as he took in Ivano's suggestion.

"But imagine the trouble we'd be in if anything happened to them, Ivano," added Volf.

"And why is that? If they are confident and sign up voluntarily, is that not their prerogative? Honor and responsibility are core tenets for any knight's life, I imagine. Better yet, if there is anyone in a position of power or if you have an audience, you could get them to make good on their promise. That should cover all your bases, I do believe." Ivano was garrulous; perhaps the high of good

business or the alcohol had gotten to him.

“Interesting. If someone is particularly loud about their opinions, I should yield to them then implore them for their assistance, you say? What a novel idea.” Then, Griswald grabbed him by the shoulder with his large hand.

“Mercadante, was it? I’m hoping you could give me some advice in private about a personal matter.”

Ivano could hardly escape—physically or otherwise. “Oh, erm, sure thing. I’ll be back in a bit, Ms. Dahlia.”

“Oh. Um, okay.”

Griswald had his usual smile but was oddly icy; his expression screamed that he wanted to step away right now. Dahlia could but watch the two of them go.

“Seems like the vice-captain’s taken a liking to Ivano. I don’t think they’ll be back for a while. Oh, looks like we’re short of a fork. I’ll be right back with it.” Volf headed toward the wagon with all the cutlery and supplies, leaving behind Dahlia to tend the stove.

The meat inside looked to be red bear, meaning it was a particularly expensive option. But she supposed the knights could capture one on their expeditions, so it was plausible that they would have meat like this. Dahlia wondered to herself as she flipped the meat.

Suddenly, a voice called out. “Erm, Chairwoman Rossetti!”

She stood and found four knights lined up beside her, all younger than Volf—than her, even. Their armor looked brand new, suggesting that they were fresh recruits. “How can I help?”

“I know this is terribly rude of me to ask, but we were hoping to ask if you and Sir Volfred were in a relationship.”

“A relationship between friends, yes.” It was not a question she wanted to be asked, and so she went with a safe answer.

“In that case, then, um, have you been busy lately, Chairwoman Rossetti?”

“Oh, yes. I am very grateful to be able to keep myself busy with my work.” As she answered with her best business smile, a senior knight called out to her,

looking for help with switching out the magic crystal in his stove.

The new recruits, having had their attempts at conversation cut off, had no choice but to return to their own cooking station. They turned on their camp and compact stoves to begin heating up a vegetable soup and grilling some meat.

“Aw, man. I wanted to talk to Ms. Rossetti more...”

“She’s a talented magical toolmaker and chairwoman, she’s got a great figure, and she’s lined up to get her barony. Sure, she’s a little bit older, but what’s not to like, am I right?”

“Yeah, and even with Scalfarotto by her side, she’s still so nice to everyone. I just know she’s a great person too.”

“She treats all of us like peers, like her age or status doesn’t matter. I hope she’s not too picky about looks or younger guys...”

“Well, she said she’s in ‘a relationship between friends’ with Scalfarotto, so that means we still have a chance. We *ought* to take the chance, right?”

“If that’s the case, then we gotta get closer with her first, and once we’re friends—”

The whispering knights were interrupted when something blotted out the sun above them. “Lads, having a fun conversation there, are you?”

“S-Sir Scalfarotto!”

Their black-haired senior had walked up within an arm’s length without so much as a sound. He smiled—or more accurately, his lips were curved in the shape of a smile, but his eyes certainly were not. A wave of frigid air crashed upon the rookies’ torsos; their mouths flapped like those of little fish, gasping for air that they could not find.

“Our squad’s advisor is a very, very important magical toolmaker. If there is the slightest disrespect shown to her, the Rossetti Trading Company’s guarantors—that includes the guildmaster of the Merchants’ Guild Viscount Leone Jedda and yours truly—will do *everything* it takes to pursue liability.” The instant Volf finished, the wave had dissipated.

“F-Forgive us!”

“W-We’ll be more mindful of our words!”

The foreheads of the four knights clapped the ground beneath them; they apologized as sincerely as they could. In return, they received from Volf a beautiful smile and a nod of the head before he quickly walked back to where Dahlia sat.

“Just now, Scalfarotto used intimidation, right?”

“Yeah. I thought I was about to piss my pants. Lord Reaper is more frightening than any monster...” one knight said as he dabbed the sweat from his brow. The knees of another were visibly trembling. Volf’s intimidation had truly chilled them to the bone. As fresh as these new recruits may have been, they had already completed basic and on-site training. They should be used to battling monsters, yet before Volf, they could not move a single finger.

“Do you think Scalfarotto might be Chairwoman Rossetti’s boy toy?”

“Remember, he’s from *the* Scalfarotto family. He’s gotta have lots to pick from.”

“Wait, you think it’s the other way around?”

“Naw, isn’t Scalfarotto with that former duchess or whatever?”

“You don’t think he’s got one on each arm? They’re totally different types of ladies, right?”

“But if it’s Scalfarotto, he’s gotta have so many more choices from his business connections and stuff. To pick someone who’s just a seven...” The rookies dropped their voices even lower until no more than the sizzling meat in front of them was audible.

A pair of senior knights walking back to their stove with some meat suddenly interjected.

“Sup, boyos? Heard about your tough times ahead!”

“Just deserts. You reap what you sow.”

The rookies froze in place.

“Sorry?”

The blue-haired knight, failing to contain his sneer, continued, “Here’s a tip for you fellas. Volf over there has *really* good hearing; he’s probably heard all that you’ve been saying.”

“No!”

All four of their heads whipped over to where Dahlia and Volf were sitting some distance away. Volf’s timing couldn’t have been better—at that exact moment, he turned around to flash a big grin and thumped his chest twice.

“Aren’t you glad? He’s telling you kids to give it your best! You’ll be training together tomorrow!”

“Should be a meaningful session for you lot.”

“Ack!” The four rookies screamed in unison.

That following day and the day after, a handful of members of the Order of Beast Hunters would take on individual training. The training grounds would see terrible scars and ruts, but word of whatever had happened on those two days would never reach outsiders’ ears.



After going around the campground and making sure his knights were all fine, Grato finally sat down on a waterproof cloth near the campfire. The vice-captain, who’d accompanied him initially, was now a ways away in the midst of what looked like a friendly conversation with the man from the Rossetti company—surprisingly, the two were getting on well.

“Here you are, captain,” said a grizzled knight as he offered a skewer of rye bread.

A rich aroma wafted from the pot of creamy white cheese in front of them. Grato took a bite after plunging the skewer into the molten dairy, the salty savoriness of which was indescribably scrumptious. To the side of the pot was a pan containing a fried egg on top of some ham. Bacon would’ve been nice too, he thought, but cheap ham and a sunny-side-up with some salt and pepper were good in their own way. It wasn’t anything exotic he hadn’t had before at his manor, but it really hit the spot while camping.

Yesterday, Grato had met with Chairwoman Rossetti to check over the camp stoves, and somehow, they'd landed on the topic of chicken eggs right off the bat. She had brought out an invention of hers called an egg case which was made of the integument of desert worms and enchanted to keep the contents from spoiling. Grato couldn't help but smile with her when she excitedly explained, "This egg case, it is lightweight *and* foldable!" Lo and behold, by the time they arrived at the camping grounds, not a single egg had been broken—something practically impossible before today. Grato could imagine the sturdy case being useful for transporting fragile items other than eggs too.

With their finances now in order, the squad could spare enough to purchase an extra wagon. Depending on their destination, that meant that they would have the option to procure eggs and other ingredients at nearby villages and the like when they were out for expeditions.

The wine from the wineskin tasted better than usual as he tried the markedly improved rations. Before he knew it, the knight at his side was silently drinking with his eyes cast down toward the ground.

When the two of them had first joined the Order of Beast Hunters, their senior knights at the time had made sure to let them know just how much rougher it had been years ago, back when they themselves were rookies—how water had been limited, how some of their comrades had thrown themselves off a cliff because of thirst, how riders had been crushed by their horses when they collapsed from dehydration. Their seniors had drilled it into them how much more comfortable expeditions had become since they'd secured a steady supply of water crystals.

By the time Grato himself became a senior figure to fresh recruits, the situation was still far from good. The few horses they had were of poor quality, making any kind of travel plain difficult. Some of them would even give out on the journey to their hunt. Field rations were hard to stomach and both the heat and cold caused much illness, leading to the resignations of many knights. Not only were potions scarce, but the number of mages and priests that traveled with them was small too. Comrades would weep as they failed to nurse their friends; hell, Grato even had to use his magical sword to burn the bodies that

they couldn't bring home.

Mages were part of the fighting force on the battlefield; the knights didn't want to ask them for water or fire if they hadn't any magic to spare. There weren't enough magic crystals to go around and they weren't easy to handle either. The hot meals, calm nights, and dry clothes that were givens in everyday life were unimaginable during expeditions.

Conditions were still dreadful even after the previous captain had petitioned for improvements. For a number of reasons—the embezzlement incident from generations prior, the monsters that inevitably slipped through the orders' nets—the nobility and bureaucrats in charge stonewalled any requests from the Beast Hunters.

Then, when Grato became their leader, he used his family's privileges and wealth to mobilize troops as well as securing rations, potions, mages, priests, horses, and wagons to batten down the hatches. Any kind of personnel or budget increase had to be wrestled for in meetings. But it was through these great efforts that he managed to reduce casualties in the field, for which he found praise from the king and approval from the other nobility. Slowly, their budget began to increase, which meant outfitting the order with more horses and equipment. It made things easier than in the past, but Grato was far from happy—it was still not enough. There were still those who were killed in combat or succumbed to injuries and many more whose health suffered on expeditions.

As captain, every time he attended a subordinate's funeral made him want to trade places with the knight in the coffin. But Grato desperately clung to life. A fight between humans and monsters was always a fight to the death, and too difficult was it to come out unscathed. Falling in battle was obviously something to be avoided, but every knight was prepared for the possibility. However, losing one's life due to lack of water or food, or because the heat, the cold, or a lack of sleep had sapped one's focus, was a tough pill to swallow.

Grato felt as though there was no one but himself to blame for the poor conditions. He would cough up blood, clench his teeth hard enough to crack them, or lose strands of hair when he removed his helmet. When he had to write letters to the bereaved, he'd curl his fist up so tightly that he'd draw his own blood when his nails dug into his palm. Dark times, as though he was

lanternless on a stormy night, had lain before him; the future had been bleak. *Had* been bleak—since when had that changed?

The first time Grato had laid hands on the silky smooth waterproof cloth, he was suspicious of whether it could really repel water. But thanks to the fabric, sleeping in a tent on a rainy night had finally become restful. Unlike waxed canvas, there was no dripping of rain or flooding of water. Sleeping on a layer of the new material meant that water did not seep up from the ground either, so both the camper and their clothes were kept warm and dry through the night. Tents had become much lighter too. The cloth had proven to be a great material for wagon bonnets as well, improving travel conditions in wet weather and when transporting the sick and injured. Equipment and rations had also become much more resistant to degradation by moisture. Replacing their heavy leather jackets, the lightweight waterproof raincoats had enabled the knights to march quicker and farther in the rain, not to mention that keeping dry helped reduce many cases of the common cold.

Though the individual toes of the socks still tickled Grato, they got rid of the itching and gave him confidence in his footwork. The toe socks, in combination with the drying insoles, also eliminated sweaty and sticky shoes, the bane of humid summer days. Comfortable feet meant that they wouldn't be distracted, allowing focus during combat and ease when walking long distances.

And now there was the zephyricloth scarf wrapped around his neck. From next summer on, there would be no more waterfalls of sweat draining from underneath armor. Farewells were due for sweat rashes and sleepless nights as well.

The man who had secured next term's budget for the zephyricloth was none other than the old friend whom Grato hadn't been able to speak to for a long time. The wine they had afterward was sweeter than honey. They'd drank until the wee hours of the morning, then went home to the chiding of their respective wives. He'd even found joy in the chiding itself—laughing along as Dalila reproached him with more anger.

Reflecting upon it, the one who'd created the various magical tools *and* repaired his relationship with his friend was just a single young magical

toolmaker. How extraordinary and miraculous that was, thought Grato as he lowered his wineskin from his lips. The strong river breeze carried through the blazing midsummer heat under the cloudless blue sky. Despite that, the compact magical stove sitting in front of him put out steady heat that caused white vapor to blow from the vegetable soup.

Suddenly, Grato became aware of an odd feeling and perked up his ears. The commotion right now was different from the usual noises during an expedition—there was sharp laughter from the younger knights, tender voices from conversing knights, and lively cheers from those tapping their wineskins together in toasts. The hubbub brought a sting of sadness deep in Grato’s nose. *Every moment of an expedition is a moment spent on survival, not living*—so the captain before him had said. But as it was right now, and as far as he could see, everybody was busy living their lives. Grato didn’t expect their next expedition to be anything like this outing, but he figured he could wrangle his men a little more time for living.

“Sir Grato, how about some sausage-on-the-bone?”

“Yes, I would love some.” Dahlia and Volf were bringing him a plate piled with an abundance of food. When she suddenly spoke, Grato found he was dabbing in a panic at the tears that had welled up in his eyes.

“Um, is it not to your liking?”

“Rest assured, everything has been delectable. It’s just, erm, the smoke—yes, the smoke got in my eyes is all.”

“Oh, I see! There’s certainly room to improve the stove and make it smoke less.”

“No, it’s not your fault; the smoke from the campfire is getting to me,” Grato claimed. Dahlia smiled back with an unguarded look of relief. Beside her was Volf, who had already begun grilling the sausages-on-the-bone. He seemed very experienced at it. “A single stove sure can cook many different types of food, Rossetti.”

“I’m writing up additional recipes as well. It would be preferable that they cook quickly, right?”

“That, and it would be delightful if they paired well with drinks.”

“Something like drinking snacks, then? And the ingredients have to keep well too...”



To see her thinking so hard brought Grato to a smile instead of tears. In fact, the campfire was far enough away that it was unthinkable that the smoke would afflict him, yet she had shown genuine concern for him and had accepted his flimsy excuse. She would do better to be more guarded and self-interested, or so he worried, for she always seemed to be so earnest and honest—this magical toolmaker named Dahlia.

With hair red as dawn and eyes green as fresh verdure, she stood firm with dignity, never forming a dependence on others yet always extending a hand to help those who needed it. Forsooth, it was she who was the elegance of summer. It was she who stood as a beacon, bright as a bright sky over those with hearts lost in bleak overcast.

“Thank you for everything so far—and for the future you’ll bring to us, Madam Toolmaker of the Order of Beast Hunters.”

Extra Story: A Father and Daughter's Magical Tool Invention Diaries—The Voice Caster

“Take a look at these, Dahlia. They change your voice.” From a shelf, Carlo took a pair of magical tools that looked like ordinary chokers and placed them on the workbench. His darling daughter, a magical toolmaker just like himself, examined them with great curiosity; her eyes practically sparkled as she did so.

Carlo put on the black leather choker and said, “Here, like this.” The voice of a wise and majestic elder came out from his lips.

“Father, this is another one of your inventions, right? Is it enchanted with siren hair?” she asked with great interest.

“That’s exactly it. The part made of pure silver in the middle there—that’s been enchanted with a siren’s hair, which means it can change your voice on top of making it louder or softer. The band is horse leather. If needed, you can enchant the choker with more strength, add a metal lock, or enhance it with a ribbon made of monster thread. You can even hide it in the collar of a shirt.” It could change not only the volume but the pitch of the wearer’s voice. Thus, it would be possible for a man to speak with a feminine voice and vice versa. The choker wasn’t particularly difficult to craft either; it might have been a good idea to teach her how earlier, but Carlo had worried for her. It was only today that he had finally decided to walk her through the process.

“They had to kill the siren to get its hair, right?” his daughter asked in a sullen tone as she stared at the accessory.

Carlo returned to the shelf to take out the magically sealed box that contained his stock of siren hair. The golden strands glittered as if the box trapped moonlight. Ten years of lying dormant inside had done little to dull their luster. “See? The siren wasn’t hunted for her hair. She found her way onto a ship at sea, and there, a singer bested her in a singing contest. That’s where this hair is from.”

“A singing contest? You’re kidding me.”

“It’s nothing but the truth, I assure you. When that singer—who, by the way, now manages the Royal Opera House—was still young, he had a voice so beautiful, it could charm the loveliest birds in the meadows.” Carlo had been classmates with the singer in high school. It had always struck him as odd that they’d both studied magical toolmaking, but the singer had always saved everyone in school talent shows by soloing the performances.

“I’d be too scared to even try competing against a siren, knowing that my life would be on the line.”

“No, it was more like friendly sparring. The siren would have taken him as a groom if he had lost, which wouldn’t have been such a bad thing since I’ve heard that the siren was a real bombshell.”

“Father! Must you always be so crass?” Dahlia chided him furiously.

Carlo realized he had been careless; that was an inappropriate comment to make to his teenage daughter. Hoping to find an escape route, he scrambled to put on the red leather choker. “The voice caster can turn your voice into something a little like this as well, Dahlia.”

“Father, you rascal, you!” After the shock of hearing her father speak in a very feminine voice had passed, Dahlia slapped him on the back a few times. He’d thought it was quite a fine voice, but it seemed that she didn’t share the feeling. At the very least, it changed the topic.

That day after dinner, as Carlo was taking some powdered medication, Dahlia called out to him, somewhat troubled. “What is that you’re taking?”

“Just something to settle my stomach. See, I’ve got a party for barons that I have to attend tomorrow...” He strained his face; it must have been infectious, as his daughter was soon wearing the same expression.

“Is it a really big deal?”

“Yeah. There’s lots to worry about with formalities, like how one must compliment a noblewoman when meeting her for the first time. I remember last year, I said to someone that she was very beautiful. Later, I found out from

a toolmaking friend that complimenting someone on their physical features was a no-no.”

“That sounds like a big pain. What should you say instead?”

“I think you’re supposed to say something nice about their clothes or accessories, but I could be very wrong. Supposedly, their musicianship or their intelligence are good choices too. But since we don’t really associate with other nobles, what is there to compliment when I’m meeting someone for the first time?”

“Are you sure you’ll be okay? If your stomach hurts that bad, maybe you should just stay home...”

“I don’t have much of a choice. I’m receiving money from my title, so I’ve got to act like a baron from time to time too.” Carlo looked away from his daughter, who seemed terribly worried for him. He coughed; the powder was still clinging to his throat. “I’ll likely be gone for the whole day tomorrow, so why don’t you try making a voice caster all on your own, Dahlia? The written specifications are tucked away in that drawer there. Feel free to use as much siren hair as we have, and we have lots of pure silver as well.”

“It seems a little hard since the tool is so small. I don’t know if I can adjust the voice well either...”

“You can make whatever kind of voice you like. How about the handsomest, most dashing manly man voice?”

“And just what kind of voice is that?!”

He couldn’t help but smile at her little pout. There was something he couldn’t tell her. The voice from the caster he’d put on earlier that afternoon wasn’t just any woman’s voice but her mother, Teresa’s. When Dahlia was still a young child, he had thought that she would’ve liked him to sing her lullabies in her mother’s voice. He’d had that possibility in mind as he made the choker, but no matter what he did, his voice came out hoarse when he sang. That’s why he had stashed the choker at the back of the shelf until today.

There was one more thing he couldn’t tell her. Though it was true that noble etiquette drove him to his wits’ end, there were also many barons of common

birth. Most gaffs were simply ignored, and saying someone was beautiful was a one-size-fits-all compliment, meaning that he hadn't caused any offense in the first place. There were other reasons for him to take medicine for his stomach—reasons that brought him to melancholy when thinking about the future.

The barons' dinner today was hosted at a duke's estate. The salon commanded a magnificent view of the flowers from foreign lands blooming in the garden. There were many nobles of higher rank and everyone was gussied up. As the orchestra played in the background, the guests talked amongst themselves.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Carlo."

"Good to see you're still kicking, Oz." Carlo was genuinely pleased to not only see someone he knew but a friend from his schooldays. Though Oswald was younger, they both held the title of baron. However, when Oswald introduced his wife, Carlo panicked for a moment.

"It is my pleasure to meet you. My name is Fiore Zola."

Carlo had no memory whatsoever of this person with light red hair and pale green eyes; in fact, he vaguely remembered a completely different woman as Oswald's wife.

Then, with a gentle smile, she clarified, "I am his second wife." Fiore must have read his thoughts; she may have been young but was still wise and clever. Standing beside her, Oswald had a big cheerful smile.

Carlo didn't know whether to apologize or to just smile and let it slide. The manuals he had read made no mention of how to deal with this kind of situation. Carlo whispered a quiet "Good for you" into his friend's ear and gave him a big clap on the back.

A sudden voice came from behind. "There you are, Carlo. There's someone who wants to talk to you about your hot water dispensers. Sorry to interrupt, Oswald, but allow me to borrow him for a second."

"By all means. I hope you have a good time here today, Carlo and Mr. Jedda."

After Oswald's graceful, noble-like valediction, the two other men set off on

their own. It was Leone Jedda—a viscount and the guildmaster of the Merchants’ Guild—who had whisked Carlo away. Though both those titles carried a lot of weight, he and Carlo were schoolmates as well, and so Leone didn’t mind his casual address.

“You seem to be keeping busy, Leone.”

“You can say that again. Ever since I became guildmaster, I haven’t had enough time for my Gabriella.” Leone would bring up his dear wife whenever he had the chance to do so, but Carlo kept his sarcastic remarks to himself. He knew better than to bring up Gabriella in any shape or form as Leone could spend all night talking about her.

“There you are, Lord Rossetti. I was just thinking how wonderful your new hot water dispenser is with the increased capacity.”

“Thank you very much for your kind words.”

The familiar-looking chairman had a friendly smile. If Carlo remembered correctly, he was a viscount. All of his water dispensers were sold through his good friend’s business, the Orlando & Co., and it seemed that the viscount was a customer as well.

“I think it would be very handy to have an even larger version. Do you think that would be possible?” It was a common suggestion, but Carlo had no desire to make them any bigger. “A big tank that could hold enough hot water for a communal bath would be just ideal for me.”

“That would indeed be possible, but with the greater size comes greater safety risks. It would be better to have multiple units for your use case.”

Though Carlo had feigned concern, Leone followed up without missing a beat. “The Merchants’ Guild has plenty in stock and we are waiting for your business.”

After that, their conversation moved away from the topic of the dispensers and on to popular shops in the capital and best-selling magical tools. The guildmaster had to attend to other nobles, so he soon said his goodbyes and headed to where he was summoned. That left Carlo to go to a server nearby for a drink to cure his thirst.

“Are you perhaps Lord Rossetti? It is an honor to meet you.” The young noblewoman introduced herself as the daughter of a baron. For a lady attending a barons’ party like this, she had on a very low-cut dress that was perhaps too good for the eyes of men. Not to mention, Carlo hadn’t even introduced himself as Rossetti yet. As they chatted about such harmless topics as magical tools and so on, she abruptly grasped his jacket with her pale, gloveless hand. “Lord Carlo, I’d *love* to get to know you and your tools a little deeper...”

As beautiful as she was, the way she suddenly called out his name in such a sultry voice sent shivers down his spine. If he were ten or even twenty years younger, he might have fallen for her moves. But thinking about that only brought his late ex-wife’s smile into his mind; his ruefulness ran too deep. “Forgive me, but the alcohol is getting to me and I’m feeling rather ill. Please let me excuse myself.”

“In that case, allow me to look after—”

“No, I’m really not feeling great.” He pressed his hand to his mouth and quickly stepped away from the scene. Thankfully, she didn’t go after him.

The stalls in the duke’s bathroom were by no means cramped. There was not a single foul odor; in fact, one might even have said it smelled rather nice inside thanks to a boulder-sized bouquet of flowers. Against the wall was a luxurious black leather armchair that allowed the occupant to adjust his shoes.

Carlo took a seat and loosened his necktie before heaving a sigh, thinking about both the young noblewoman’s eyes and the chairman’s. Those eyes had hardly seen him at all; they had no interest in his looks, personality, or social standing. They had been fixed on one thing only—his skills as a magical toolmaker. More accurately, the people behind those eyes lusted after his skills. Carlo mumbled aloud to no one in particular, “*He never forgets, does he?*”

The first time *he* had gotten in touch was when Carlo had made the water cannon. His invention was designed to clean exterior walls with a powerful jet of water, but the whole Magical Tool Research Group had gotten carried away and maxed the output on the thing. As if they hadn’t already overdone it

enough, they'd fired it at the school building and punched a hole straight through. The consequences were worse than they'd anticipated—as was the ire of their teachers.

Some of the older students in their research circle were from noble backgrounds and had more than enough to cover the damages done, but it was surprising that none of them were suspended from school. The following month, Carlo was called into the deputy headmaster's office as the primary contributor to the invention. As he prepared himself for a late (but well-deserved) scolding, he opened the door to find someone else in the office.

It was a man in a black three-piece suit with leather shoes polished all too perfectly. His skin was so fair that there was no doubt he was from the nobility. He smiled like a doll. "Master Carlo Rossetti, how would you like to work in the castle and serve the kingdom as a magical toolmaker?"

Carlo had not expected a scout from the castle. What the man offered would be a dream job for many of Carlo's classmates.

The man added, "I promise very reasonable remuneration and excellent conditions." His words were very polite and the tone of his voice was very kind. However, the eyes that stared back at Carlo were a serpent's—cold and, presumably, cold-blooded.

Carlo refused on the spot, nervously claiming that he had plans to succeed his father in business and to make tools for the common people. He added that his grades were far from good and that he wasn't fit to work at the castle.

The man showed nary a sign that he'd taken offense or felt regret at Carlo's response and said matter-of-factly, "Master Rossetti, please contact me if you ever change your mind. I shall see you again."

Carlo then left the room and—he remembered distinctly—began sweating profusely. By the time he was home, he remained just as rattled. He was afraid that he'd brought trouble to his parents, so he had a talk with his father.

After hearing the story, Carlo's father said, "Probably something to do with weapons or intelligence. I'm sure they'd treat you well there. You have one question to ask yourself: are those the kinds of magical tools *you* want to make?"

“No way. The things I want to make are for everyday life, things that will bring a smile to the people who use them.”

His second instant refusal of the day brought a big smile to his father’s face. He clapped Carlo on the shoulder. “That’s exactly how I answered him too.”

The next time Carlo met the man wasn’t long after he’d created the voice caster. It was a tool made for his mentor Professor Lina, whose voice had been getting hoarser over the years. It was to get a few chuckles out of her and his other friends that he’d added the option to change one’s voice—something that Carlo hadn’t given much thought afterward. However, upon Lina’s suggestion, Carlo ultimately put the voice caster on the market as a device for people who had lost their voices to illness.

The following month, and though Carlo had already graduated, he was called to the headmaster’s office for whatever odd reason. Professor Lina brought him there with her face terribly pale. As they walked silently down the hall, she flashed her palm at him for only a brief moment; marked on it was a single word: refuse. Carlo had a bad feeling about this, and his instinct proved to be right on the mark as the man was waiting inside.

“Your voice caster is quite the magnificent piece. I will accept whatever compensation or conditions you ask for your services. You may work wherever you wish if the castle is not to your liking; all I ask is that you tell me where you will do so. Won’t you work as a magical toolmaker for the kingdom?” His polite words were just as cacophonous as before and his gaze was no less icy.

After thanking him for his compliment, Carlo pulled no punches and answered him outright. “I cannot make tools that might be used to hurt others.”

The man’s facade broke and his smile disappeared. What was left seemed to be the face of an extremely controlling man. “Mr. Rossetti, I shall see you again.” His farewell was nearly identical to the one he’d offered the previous month; the only change was to Carlo’s title.

Another few years passed. In that time, the only jobs Carlo undertook directly from the castle were to service or repair their large hot water dispensers. However, there came an occasion on which he received an order of a different

kind. The foundation had been constructed by the castle's toolmakers, not him, but he took a contract from the Merchants' Guild to apply a sköll fang enchantment to it to prevent overheating. That was all there was to the job. He did not meet with the man that time, which led Carlo to feel relieved; the man must've forgotten about him.

However, since a while before that, Carlo had been consulting other toolmakers on the development of water dispensers that could output large volumes at a high temperature, and that hadn't been for nobles either. Leone worried for him, saying that perhaps Carlo was taking jobs that didn't sit well with him. The first thing that came to mind was Dahlia. The second thing was the man.

Though both inventions were under his name, the dryer and the hot water dispensers were magical tools born from Dahlia's ideas. Not only that, but her experiments with waterproof cloth had been successful. It only required a little bit more fine-tuning before it could be sent off to the Merchants' Guild for registration. It was a promising invention that seemed to be very useful and applicable to many different situations.

Dahlia was very talented as both a magical toolmaker and an inventor, and that meant danger. When she was still very young, Dahlia had drawn metal birds that flew in the air, ships that dashed across oceans, horseless carriages that carried people over land—all fairy-tale devices that had tickled Carlo. With some difficulty but in great detail, she had described how those vehicles worked.

He couldn't help but think it curious, and so he'd asked from whom she had learned about those things. It shocked Carlo when she'd answered with a big smile that they were things from the world in which she'd lived prior to her rebirth in this one.

Heaven-blessed—that was the term they used in this kingdom to describe child prodigies and people with unparalleled talent. Was Dahlia from the heavens or a dreamlike world? Carlo had no doubt about what she had said, but he couldn't say that others would be as trusting if they were to learn about it. Others would cast judgment on her, talk behind her back, or worse—her talent would make her a target.

Carlo had made her promise that she'd never tell anyone else and had advised her to forget about it all. And after that, Dahlia had never spoken about the subject again. He prayed it was nothing more than a simple case of fanciful imagination of the kind that children so often had, and he had sealed those memories away.

After Dahlia graduated school, her talents began to bloom in full. Carlo wanted nothing to get in the way of that, not as her father nor her mentor in toolmaking. But the possibility was never far from the forefront of his mind that the man would tempt her as he had Carlo's father and himself. Today, the day of the party, was one of those days that the thought plagued him.

Carlo made his way to the salon to look for his toolmaking pals and to say goodbye to them. After explaining that he had another obligation after the party, he hightailed it out of the estate for the Orlando & Co. building. Inside, Carlo's close friend caught a glimpse of him and immediately wrapped up his work. The two men headed to their watering hole and into a private room, and Carlo began to grumble about his problems and get his friend's advice. The hair dryer, the hot water dispenser, the voice caster—they were all inventions that could be manipulated for maleficent purposes. But magical tools should serve to improve the lives of people, Carlo reasoned.

His friend replied, "Carlo, the purpose of a tool is determined by the hand that wields it. The big knife that guts fish has a blade much like that of the small dagger that pierces a person through the heart, and the intent behind a tool's creation does not always define how it is used."

It took quite some time for Carlo to come up with anything to say. His friend was right on the mark.

His friend refilled his glass. "You're a bad drunk. Don't think too hard about what happened today. Instead, focus on what you can do from now on. If anything happens, you know where to find me," he said to reassure him. Carlo then washed down his anxiety with another mouthful of drink.

Carlo didn't get back to the Green Tower until after midnight. All the lights were off; Dahlia must already have been sleeping. He'd had very much to drink but didn't feel very much drunk. Oh well. No choice but to dig out that

expensive bottle of red hidden in the workshop and pour a beaker of it.

My worries were simply the result of having too much to drink. There was no logical reason to be so anxious. The men from the castle probably ask everyone the same question, so my case wasn't special. I'll be able to spend the rest of my days with Dahlia, quietly and uneventfully, he tried convincing himself. He realized his fists were clenched tightly.

Quiet and uneventful days—Carlo knew that to be a sickening lie. Behind all of Dahlia's different smiles was the red-haired beauty who had been Carlo's wife. *Happily together forever and ever*, she'd once said, but, lost for words, laugh was all he could do. Teresa had then responded by laughing in exactly the same manner. With her at his side, the appeal of money, titles, and reputation had paled. There was nothing else that he needed as long as he had Teresa.

But before long, she had slipped away like a fistful of sand. His wife had been wrenched away from him, and he couldn't let that happen with Dahlia too. He would give everything he had to fight against that.

Neither he nor Dahlia made tools that could hurt others. Whatever they crafted, they had in mind the goal of making everyday life more convenient. They created tools that made others happy. Even if the forces arrayed against him were too strong and would sweep him away, he must protect his daughter. The intelligence agency, or high-ranking nobles, or—hell—even the royals would have Dahlia for nefarious reasons.

If there was one fortunate thing, it was that he was blessed with good friends. "I'll leave her in everyone's care..." he mumbled to himself, reaffirming his conviction. Even if, standing alone, he lacked strength, the combined power of his friends would surely keep Dahlia safe. There was so much that his own clumsy hands couldn't do for Dahlia. There was so much left to teach Dahlia. That was why he had been stealthily making everyone his debtors in exchange for one promise: to help Dahlia out if she ever needed it.

As many people as he had asked, not one had refused. And Carlo decided to keep at it in secret. He'd made sure that if anything were to happen to him, there would be many hands extended to Dahlia in his stead. If one person wasn't enough, then two, four, or eight people together could stand as her

shield. Carlo knew all too well that it was a very selfish demand to make of his friends. It would be good if his unfounded worry were to pass. It would be better if nothing were to happen. It would be best if Dahlia never learned of the arrangements he'd made.

"Welcome home—father! You're *still* drinking?!" It seemed that Dahlia had rushed down the steps as soon as she'd woken from her sleep. "You reek of alcohol... You're drinking too much again! Haven't I told you not to drink at home if you've been out drinking already?!"

There was just something about the way she was chiding him that reminded Carlo of Teresa, and it certainly stung. Dahlia's tone and words were less like his wife's and more so like those of Sofia, the maid who had worked for them. He was loath to admit it, but she also gave off the impression of his own mother.

"Oh, but the moon is so beautiful tonight. It just made me want another sip." The perfect semicircle glowed a cold white outside the window—something Carlo hadn't even noticed until just now when he was scrambling for an excuse.

But his daughter paid him no mind. She grabbed the bottle from the table. "You can have just what is in the beaker, then, and no more. I'll be using the rest for stew!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Hold on! That's a really nice bottle of wine there and a perfect partner with whom to appreciate the moon..."

"Then I'll have one glass as I stare at the damn thing too. The rest goes in the stew!"

"Hey, Dahlia? If you think about it, it's going down the same hatch and coming out the same way. Why split hairs between drinking and eating the wine?"

"Yeah. Freakin'. Right."

And just like that, the slightly expensive bottle of wine had been confiscated. Tomorrow's stew should be quite fancy, then. Carlo sat there, heartbroken, as Dahlia ran upstairs to stash away the bottle. Before long, she ran back down to him. She had turned the bottle of wine into a pitcher of water. Carlo felt ashamed to have his own daughter, knowing that he had drunk too much, bring him medicine to prevent a hangover.

Ashamed as he was, though, he realized that Dahlia was a very levelheaded person. Even if the man came a-knocking in the future, Carlo had no doubt that she'd give a decisive no, and maybe it'd all blow over. She was kind but strong-willed, so there was nothing to worry about; it turned out that he really had just had too much to drink, he supposed.

"Not bad, huh?" A voice—not Dahlia's—came from out of the blue. It was a man's voice, slightly affected and oddly familiar. Carlo looked up to see his daughter with a big, bright smile and a voice caster around her neck. The leather was different in color than either of his casters, giving it away as the copy she had made today. "Doesn't it sound just like you, father?"

Now that she mentioned it, he realized that he hadn't recognized the voice because he didn't know what he sounded like to others. It was obvious that Dahlia was even impersonating his intonation and mannerisms. Carlo swiftly slapped one of the casters around his own neck and replied in Teresa's voice and tone, "Very well done, Magical Toolmaker Rossetti."

Dahlia, with the choker still on, burst out laughing, and he did too. How funny it was to finally hear those two voices laugh together in the workshop—so funny, it brought tears to his eyes.

For her first go at a voice caster, Dahlia had done rather well. But her laughter was sweetest in nobody's voice but her own. Carlo did not pray aloud either in his altered voice or in his own but silently to himself: *May my daughter live a life with few tears and much laughter.* He unclasped the voice caster and gingerly tucked it away in a drawer.





Head Treasurer of the
Castle Treasury
Gildovan

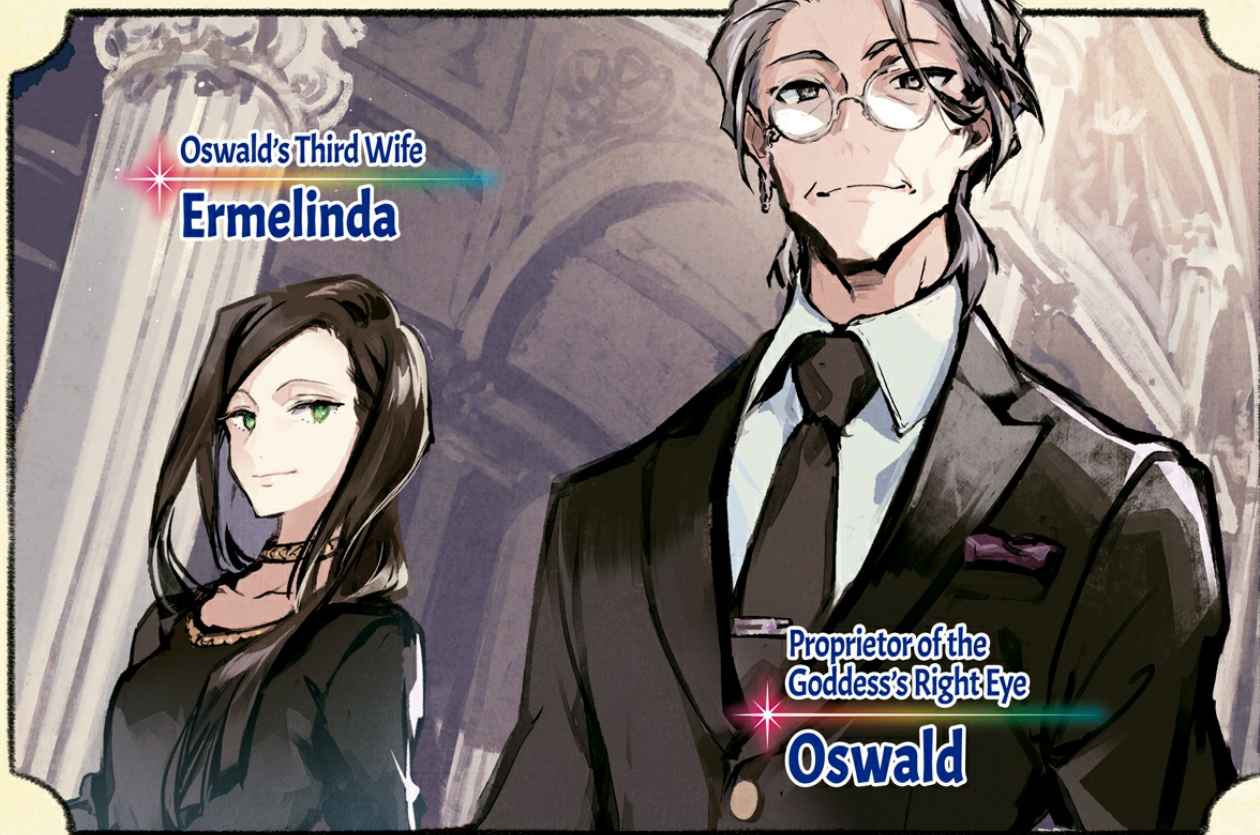
Captain of the Order
of Beast Hunters
Grato

Scarlet Armor in the
Order of Beast Hunters
Dorino

Scarlet Armor in the
Order of Beast Hunters
Randolph

Handsome Knight from
the Order of Beast Hunters
Volfred

Reincarnated Female
Magical Toolmaker
Dahlia



Oswald's Third Wife

Ermelinda

Proprietor of the
Goddess's Right Eye

Oswald



Head Manager of the
Magical Garment Factory

Lucia

Guildmaster of the
Tailors' Guild

Fortunato

Bonus Translator's and Editor's Notes

[Osman/TL]

Can you believe it? There goes the fourth volume—and my first—of *Dahlia in Bloom: Crafting a Fresh Start with Magical Tools*. My name's Osman and I'd like to thank you so very much—not only for reading to the end of Volume 4 but also for buying the premium eBook and joining us for this very special bonus content at the end.

In case you missed it, that's right, there's a new translator in town. For me at least, there's always a certain kind of pressure or expectation whenever I take over an in-translation series and especially because Niki has done such an amazing job. I hadn't expected to be this engaged and excited by the story of *Dahlia* when I had first signed onto this project, and I'd like to think that the translation of the previous volumes played a huge part.

This project also spoke to me with its lavish depictions of food and drink. I'm an avid home cook and drinker, so I tried my utmost to not only accurately depict but to capture the essence of the eating and drinking scenes. (They've made my tummy growl more than I'd like to admit!)

As you might have guessed by the title, I've roped the new editor of the series in, Shakuzan, to talk about some translation choices we've made. I say "we" because the words you've read aren't just mine. To borrow the drinking theme from *Dahlia*, let me frame it this way: I distilled the liquors, but Shakuzan shook everything up to make such a smooth cocktail. I'd put most of the words down, but it was he who made the end product read so well.

Thanks for indulging in my silly metaphor. Now, allow me to show you a glimpse of our thinking process.

[Shakuzan/ED]

I'm grateful to be a member of the new *Dahlia* team. When the call went out

for a replacement editor, I started reading volume one and, after just a few pages, thought, *This may already be my favorite JNC title I'd never heard of.*

For me, a large part of the appeal is the high-toned period language, which both Niki and Osman have handled with commendable sensitivity. (Of course, most of the series is from the perspective of a modern Japanese office lady, so there's a certain amount of leeway for anachronistic idioms, but my back-and-forth with Osman has involved a lot of questions like "Can we get away with a sentence like 'His face *telegraphed* his intentions'?") At any rate, *Dahlia* is not the kind of LN that exists on the page merely as a skeletal outline for an eventual anime adaptation.

Another factor in *Dahlia's* appeal, closely related to the first, is that its otherworld seems to correspond not to Western Europe in the Middle Ages but to Italy sometime between the Industrial Revolution and the First World War. It's nice for variety (and allows me to amuse myself by imagining the whole thing as a Luchino Visconti period piece; I have cast Burt Lancaster in the part of Grato), but more importantly, it presents Dahlia with all kinds of personal and political problems that she can't solve with magic—problems that demand the creative resources she brought with her from her past life as an OL. (It hit me in the middle of reading the flashback story at the end of this volume that *Dahlia* is in no small part the story of a Japanese woman learning to deal with Italian men.) The fantastic elements, like magical toolmaking, are persuasive because of the social context they occupy, in which there are conflicts, some generations old, between institutions like the Order of Beast Hunters, the Royal Treasury, and the various guilds. It's a bit of pure wish fulfillment that Dahlia gets to make a new life for herself, but she cannot make it exactly as she pleases, nor under circumstances of her own selection. Just as in real life, the past—here embodied in her father's friends and adversaries, the book of court etiquette, the bad blood between Grato and Gildo—weighs upon her brain like a nightmare.

Up to this point, Dahlia has always been able to win people over simply by having a richer heart, a quicker mind, and a harder work ethic than anybody around her, but now she has a few rivals who want to finish her—and she can't get too friendly with the enemy; she has to move differently now that she's no

longer an independent artisan but a player in a cutthroat industry. That means learning to protect her good name, correct wrongs, and above all to project her voice a little louder.

Dahlia's old world is long dead to her, but by the end of volume four, her new life is still taking shape. It is always in this kind of in-between period that monsters appear. But fortunately, Sir Volfred is never far from Dahlia's side...

Written on Red Mountain, Kororado-no-Kuni

Lesser Heat, Reiwa Year of the Water Tiger

Miss and Ms.

[Osman/TL]

In the previous volumes, Dahlia was sometimes referred to as “Miss Dahlia” but never “Ms. Dahlia”. “Miss” and “Ms.”—what’s the difference, you may ask. It was a generic change so small that it may have been imperceivable, but it was something that I thought was important.

Readers that are familiar with the Japanese language may know that when addressing someone, honorifics play a crucial role. There may be differences in, for example, formality, implication, and respect.

Oswald is a character that addresses Dahlia as ダリヤ嬢 (*Dahlia-jō*). I have chosen to keep using “Miss” in these situations as it is essentially analogous to the Japanese—used for addressing young girls or unmarried women. While I don’t think it’s received to be as patronizing as the German *Fräulein*, there should be a distinction from the neutral “Ms.” Another reason is that other characters address Dahlia as ダリヤさん (*Dahlia-san*). “さん” would be better as “Ms.”, as it doesn't emphasize her youth like “Miss” and 嬢 does.

Uragano

[Osman/TL]

“Do you know what his nickname was back in his college days? ‘Uragano,’

they called him.”

“They did? My father?” She was rather taken aback. It was a term to liken someone to a tempest or a calamity, neither of which matched her image of Carlo.

I suppose sticking to the story’s setting, the author *loves* to make names of Italian words whenever she can. “Uragano” is one of those occasions. I had options for dealing with this, and one of them was to translate it completely (i.e., Carlo the Tempest). However, that would mean completely losing the Italian flavor of the setting and it’d be an unfortunate way of going about it.

In the translation, we used the name as it is before explaining what it meant in prose. For one, it was an attempt to mirror the source, where the Japanese characters say 暴風雨 (*rainstorm*) but are read as *uragāno*, from the Italian word meaning “cyclone.” It also felt fitting to keep the nickname as it was to preserve the Italian/Mediterranean setting of the story.

Honeyfuggle

[Osman/TL]

“To get preferential treatment and pricing, some companies might employ women to make a weapon of their feminine wiles and pursue false relationships. It happens in the castle more often than you might expect. And of course, honeyfuggles can be men too.”

Now that was a fun word! There were a couple reasons as to this choice. The practical reason was that the Japanese word 罠女 (*trap + woman*), if used literally like that, would have a terrible and inaccurate connotation in English. Secondly, “honeyfuggle” was very flavorful and seemed fitting. The old-timey setting and the disposition of the author to coin new terms persuaded me that this “chiefly dialectal” entry in the dictionary would be a good addition.

A consideration for “honeyfuggle” was that the word in English is used as a verb. While adding *-er* to the end of it and nominalizing the verb would have

been appropriate, something about that felt too on the nose. Consider it artistic license.

Decisions like this may cause unforeseen consequences though as there is only so much I can read ahead. If in the future the author would reuse the term and incorporate the literal “trap” meaning into the story, I’d have essentially set myself up for failure. There’s always the choice of adapting potential future plot points to fit with “honeyfuggle,” but that’d be a problem for future Osman to deal with.

Zephyricloth

[Osman/TL]

“How about naming it ‘zephyricloth’?” Forto suggested.

“Ooh, that sounds like it’s from another world or something!” exclaimed Lucia.

“I didn’t take you for a muse, Mr. Forto.” Ivano seemed genuinely impressed, and so was Dahlia. There was a world of difference between her naming sense and Forto’s.

This was a very deliberate choice to stray away from the source text. The original characters for it were 微風布 (*breeze + cloth*) and read as *auratēlo*—comprised of the Italian or Latin words of *aura* and *tela* that more or less matched the morphemes of the Japanese. Also to note is the altered spelling of the latter component. The problem with the faux-Italian is that it means nothing in English—“auratelo” is essentially gibberish to the reader without any context. Furthermore, the editor pointed out that most English speakers would intuitively read “aura” in the sense of “someone’s vibes” and that would add confusion.

Being an invention, it was bound to crop up more frequently later in the volume and series, and so I figured it was worth it to strike the meaning into the English-translated term. Sticking together “zephyr” and “cloth” got me a flavorsome combination of the original meaning of the term. However, one of my concerns was with the English word “zephyr”, which is named after the

Greek god Zephyrus. I didn't know if I wanted to indirectly introduce Greek mythology to this world of *Dahlia*, but it felt safe enough that the average reader wouldn't take it that way.

[Shakuzan/ED]

Intelligibility was Osman's first priority in coming up with a new name for Dahlia's Auratela, but incidentally, I love that Zephyricloth sounds like one of those whimsical 19th-century brand names (e.g. Loco-foco brand self-igniting cigars).

[Osman/TL]

I think that about wraps up this volume! I hope you appreciated the glimpse into our minds and the thought process behind some of the translation choices of Volume 4 as much as we've sure enjoyed reading everyone's speculations and opinions on the forums and Discord channel. Until the next volume!

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Dahlia in Bloom: Crafting a Fresh Start With Magical Tools Volume 4

by Hisaya Amagishi

Translated by Osman Wong Edited by Shazukan

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Illustrations by Kei

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Ebook edition 1.0: August 2022

Premium E-Book